RollingStone

AUS/NZ

APRIL – MAY 2022
ISSUE 008

Plus:

BENEE

Midnight OIL

Empire OF THE SUN'S **Luke** STEELE

Camp COPE

And More

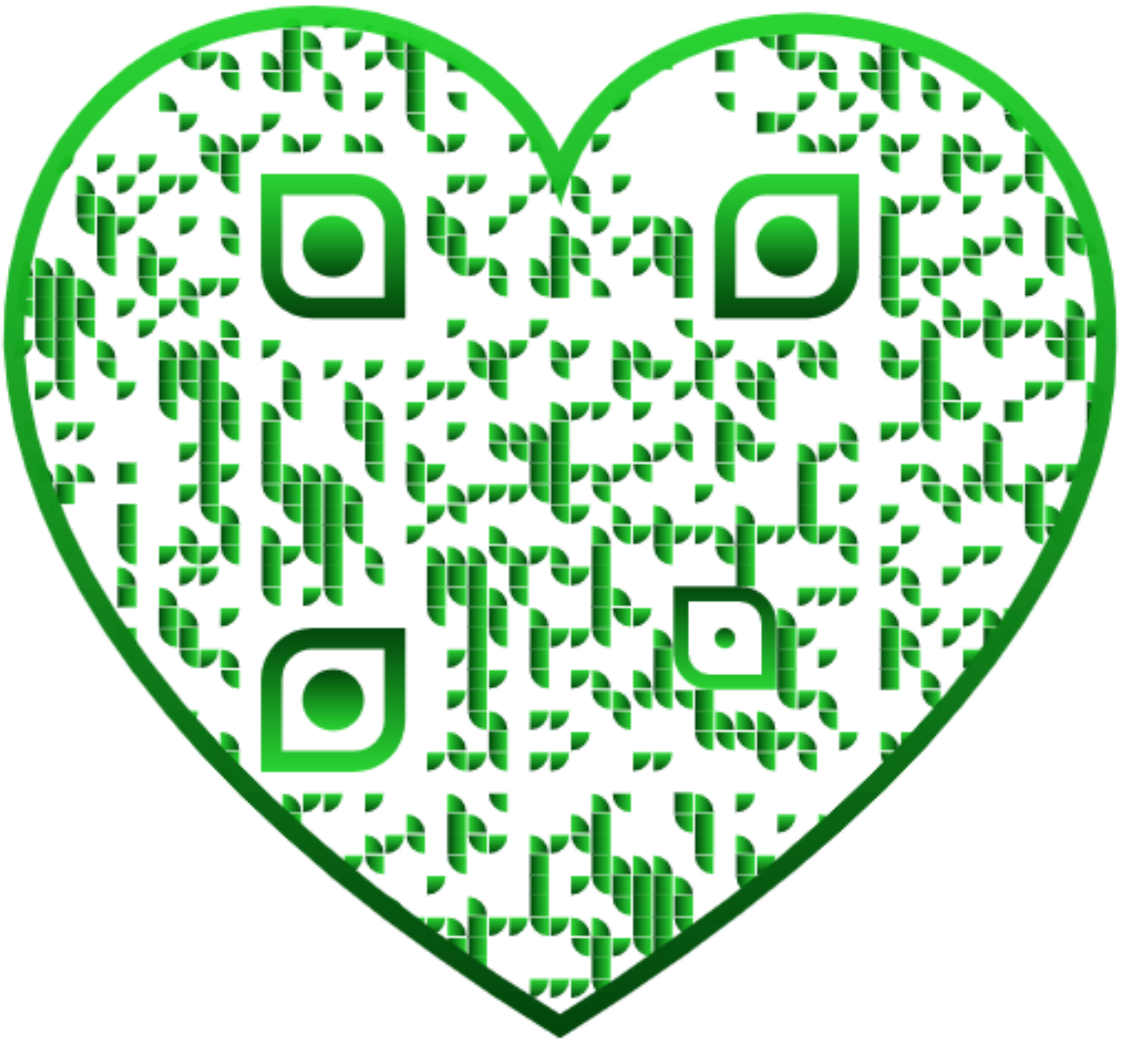
GLOWING GREEN

JUST HOW *Clean is* AUSTRALIA'S NUCLEAR ENERGY?

BYRON BAY'S UNHOUSED EPIDEMIC

Daniel Johns

THE DEFIANT *ONE*



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SCAN TO VISIT

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By Tyler Jenke

BENEE
PHOTOGRAPH BY
ZARA MIRKIN

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BY ALAN SEPINWALL

On the Cover

Daniel Johns, photographed on February 12 2022, by **Sam Wong** (@samwongphoto_)

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FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: LUKE STEELE: JODI STEELE, ERIN SIMKIN/HULU, 2, MIDNIGHT OIL: JESSE HUNNIFORD, MOORILLA GALLERY

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Editor's Letter

The value of scarcity

SCARCITY. IT'S WHAT moves us to consume. It's why some of us have camped out overnight just to get tickets to see our favourite musician perform live. It's why NFTs are booming in every single sector of the tech and entertainment industries. And why Daniel Johns is an Australian music icon.

Fans have been waiting for new music from the Silverchair linchpin since his debut solo album *Talk* in 2015. They weren't appeased with Instagram life updates in between, nor were they satiated with his presence in media as an authoritative voice on timely topics. Not a tweet, not a peep. When Daniel Johns is off cycle, he is nowhere to be seen–unless of course you live in the harbour town of Newcastle and spot him picking up paint and canvases from the local art supply store.

> It is currently well and truly 'Daniel Johns season'.

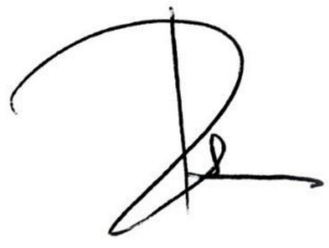
Thankfully, it is currently well and truly 'Daniel Johns season'. You may have noticed the drip-feeding of nostalgia on his social media accounts, or maybe you read a headline or watched a TV broadcast about one of the revelations in his podcast, *Who is Daniel Johns?*. Or perhaps you binged every podcast episode in one go and followed it up with a deep dive into his lionised discography. It doesn't matter how you first entered 'Daniel Johns season', what matters is what it means for local music.

One of the biggest digital platforms in the world, Spotify, has not only invested heavily in an Australian artist, they've backed a winning horse. Daniel Johns beat out Spotify's more than $100 million-dollar investment 'The Joe Rogan Experience' to take out the title of the streaming giant's most popular podcast in Australia–and this was before Neil Young kicked off an efficacious campaign to cancel Rogan. The shift toward branded content should come as no surprise; who can forget Netflix's evolution of its core business from DVD rental service, to content licensee, to original content creator.

In essence, Daniel Johns' runaway success is a blueprint for tech giants; a template for big money to be made from local music without acquiring catalogues. It's a brand new pride-point for the local industry and it won't be the last.

While the return of Daniel Johns is celebrated on our cover, the rest of this issue provides another illuminating view of the world. From music interviews with acts like BENEE, Midnight Oil, Camp Cope, and Luke Steele, to fascinating chronicles of psychedelic drugs and their healing powers, the unsheltered crisis in star-studded Byron Bay, and the big question surrounding nuclear energy.

We hope this issue provides insight, comfort and entertainment during these unprecedented times for Australia and New Zealand. Last month we held our second annual Awards party in Sydney and later in the year, with some luck, we'll take the Awards to Aotearoa. Until then, we'll continue to write and share the stories that move you.



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ON THE COVER

DANIEL JOHNS FOR ROLLING STONE

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PRODUCTION: **LONG STORY SHORT**

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PANHEAD CUSTOM ALES:

How Beer, Art and Petrol Combine to Make Panhead Brewery One of a Kind

BY AUGUSTUS WELBY

FOR A GUY WHO proudly calls himself a "beer bogan", Panhead Brewery founder Mike Neilson has a near and dear relationship with visual art.

Neilson was raised an out-and-out petrolhead and his passion for Sixties hot rod culture hasn't dimmed even as he's become one of New Zealand's most renowned craft brewers.

Alongside General Manager Josh Drake, Neilson has turned the Upper Hutt-based Panhead Brewery into an outlet for merging his two great passions, while also reaching an audience of beer drinkers on either side of the Tasman.

Panhead's aesthetic alignment with Kustom Kulture (that is, the aesthetics born out of Californian hot rod culture from the Sixties) has played a major role in the company's runaway success. Though Neilson didn't exactly plan it this way.

After doing time as the head brewer at a major craft beer company, Neilson and his wife, Anna, decided to launch their own brewery in 2013. Neilson knew what sort of beer he wanted to make, but he didn't have a clear vision for the brand's aesthetic identity.

"I knew the beer needed a label, but what I thought was a good idea turned out to be absolute rubbish," Neilson says.

Rather than sketching out his own designs, Neilson brought in graphic artist and friend, Anton Hart, who suggested the company's branding draw influence from Neilson's petrolhead background.

“

IT WAS JUST learning a bit more about Mike and what his passions were and what he loved doing,” says Hart.

Hart’s suggestion–that Neilson’s passion for hot rods, tattoos, and heavy metal should inform the Panhead aesthetic–has gone on to shape the company’s entire ethos.

“It was fitting to create a brand around yourself and the people who live and breathe the beer,” says Neilson. “It makes it very easy to tell the story of what we’re into, because we live and breathe it every day.”

The Panhead name was inspired by the Harley Davidson Panhead V-twin engine. The engine earned its nickname based on an observation that its heads resembled upside down saucepans. But, where some see cookware, Neilson sees beer.

“I thought it looked like two pints of beer,” he says.

Hart designed the Panhead logo to reflect Neilson’s beery interpretation: it features a Harley Panhead cylinder reimagined as a pint glass, with *Top Gun*-style wings springing from either side.

“It’s a very simple, more graphic kind of style, but it still plays on the Kustom Kulture stuff,” Hart says.

Following the successful launch of Panhead’s four core beers–Supercharger APA, Quickchange XPA, Port Road Pils, and Blacktop Oat Stout–Neilson, a compulsive tinkerer, was eager to introduce a range of custom ales. To help distinguish the custom ales from Panhead’s core range, Hart called on comic book creator and tattoo artist, Simon Morse, who came up with some appropriately unhinged designs.

“Anton came ‘round to my studio and we were talking about making it more of an arty label, but lowbrow, bogan kind of art, which is right up my alley,” Morse says. “It’s all hot rods, tattoos, comics, all that kind of fun stuff, which works really well for beer cans.”

Morse’s first assignment was illustrating a label for The Vandal, an 8% NZ IPA. “I’d known Simon for a bit and I knew that he loved that whole Rat Fink style, which we adopted and changed for Vandal,” says Hart.

Rat Fink is a hot rod character conceived by American artist and custom car designer Ed "Big Daddy" Roth. Roth’s artwork exemplifies what Morse calls lowbrow art.

“Lowbrow is kind of like hot rods, comics, monsters, what I would call bubble-gum graphics or skateboard graphics, which is all stuff that I’m heavily influenced by,” Morse says.

Much like Neilson, Morse uses the terms “lowbrow” and “bogan” with affection. “The thing about art is that there’s beauty in everything, whether it’s highbrow, lowbrow, whatever,” he says. “And we seek the beauty in petrol, I guess.”

▼ Panhead APA is joined by Sandman Hazy Pale Ale, the newest member of the Panhead range. Available mid-April at Dan Murphy’s.

▶ Artist Simon Morse illustrating Tyre Fryer of the Tarmacker range.

▼ Paying homage to Ed Roth in the Engineering workshop at Panhead Brewery.

▼ A Simon Morse classic illustration for the award-winning Black Sabbath Barley Wine.

The Vandal was released alongside three other custom ales–Trekken (a 6% farmhouse saison), Vindicator (a 7.5% strong ale) and the award-winning Black Sabbath (an 11% black barley and rye wine)–all of which feature Morse’s original artwork and Hart’s graphic design.

The custom ales range not only ushered in a more devilish and provocative aesthetic for Panhead, but it also marked the beginning of another Panhead mainstay: Neilson’s penchant for customising beers in honour of real-life Kustom Kulture heroes.

For instance, The Vandal got its name from a 1919 Dodge Bucket that hot rod enthusiast John Reid drove around New Zealand in the 1960s. When Reid grew tired of the car’s flake green paint job, he sprayed it black and rechristened it Black Sabbath, hence Panhead’s Black Sabbath.

But Kustom Kulture folklore isn’t the only thing that guides Neilson’s brewing practises. Beginning with the Canheads series in 2015, the art direction itself has had a direct influence on Neilson’s customisation in the brewery.

“It morphed into, ‘How cool would it be to have these characters and then you brewed beer to match the character of the person?’” says Neilson.

Neilson was already a beer-obsessed petrolhead when he launched Panhead back in 2013. But with the injection of art and storytelling, he’s as committed to creating exceptional beer today as he was on Day One.

“Beer was kind of easy for me, but to be challenged to go, ‘This is the character, this is its personality–what is the beer that best suits that?’, the creative method was turned on its head,” he says.

“Otherwise it’s just: make beer, put a label on it, get it sold; whereas this is a bit deeper and it changed the way we made beer.”

TOM REIDY

2022 ROLLING STONE AWARDS

Sailor Jerry 2022 Rolling Stone Australia ★ AWARDS ★

The Sailor Jerry Rolling Stone Australia Awards will pay tribute to the best and brightest on the local music scene.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: AMY SHARK: SUPPLIED, PNAU: SUPPLIED, THE KID LAROI: BRENDAN BOWEN, TASH SULTANA: @DARAMUNNIS.

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Best New Artist

Nominees

Cat & Calmell

The Sydney pop duo were full of angst and self-awareness in their debut EP *Life of Mine*, released last June. Receiving praise from all the right places both here and overseas, the pair have quickly emerged as Australia's very own Kali Uchis/Rihanna hybrid.

Genesis Owusu

After sweeping the ARIA Awards last year with four trophies, Canberra's Kofi Owusu Ansah is still riding the wave of rightful success from his funky, proud, and multi-layered debut album *Smiling with No Teeth*.

Jesswar

Following the release of her debut EP *TROPIXX* last year, all eyes have been on Fijian-Australian rapper Jesswar. Honouring her Pasifika community and calling out the music industry machine along the way, Jesswar is a bold superstar in the making.

King Stingray

Interweaving reverb-heavy riffs and Indigenous storytelling and language, Yolŋu surf-rockers King Stingray have been turning heads and heating up live stages ever since the release of their powerful debut single "Hey Wanhaka" in 2020.

Masked Wolf

It should come as no surprise that Masked Wolf became a household name in 2021. With "Astronaut in The Ocean" becoming the most-Shazamed song of the year, and with a debut mixtape in the world, Harry Michael is just getting started.

MAY-A

Maya Cumming has only been on the scene for a few years, but it didn't take long for her to catch fire thanks to her debut EP, *Don't Kiss Ur Friends*. Charting at number 31 and even scoring an ARIA nom for Break-through Artist, MAY-A is kicking goals.

Peach PRC

Having risen to fame via TikTok, Shaylee Curnow's music career broke through with the viral single "Josh", which caught the attention of countless music-lovers here and abroad. Now with a debut EP on the way, it's clear that this is only the beginning.

Teenage Dads

Melbourne's Teenage Dads are undoubtedly one of 2021's big success stories. Bringing garage rock back in a big way, the quartet are ensuring they approach every part of their burgeoning career with infectious enthusiasm and energy.

CONTRIBUTORS:
Poppy Reid & Tyler Jenke

Mia Rodriguez took out Best New Artist in 2021

MASKED WOLF: LUCKY ENT

Best Record

Nominees

Amy Shark
Cry Forever

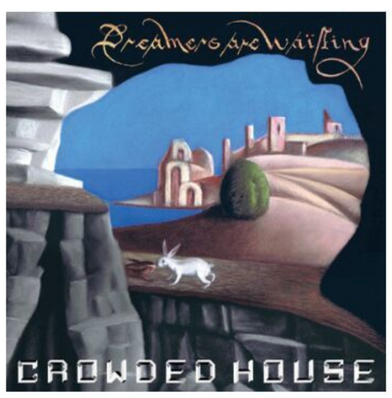
After exploring some of the more painful chapters from her past in her music, Amy Shark delivered an album so powerful it topped the ARIA chart for two weeks in a row, and marked her second record to reach number one.

Baker Boy
Gela

With *Gela* (pronounced GE-lah, a shortened version of Danzal's skin name, Burralung, in Yolŋu Matha), the "Fresh Prince of Arnhem Land" offered his most definitive and bold statement to date.

Crowded House
Dreamers Are Waiting

Completed in isolation, Crowded House's first album in over a decade was given 4/5 stars by *Rolling Stone* due to the "undeniable spark in every track that lifts it to a higher plane".



Genesis Owusu
Smiling with No Teeth

Politically and culturally driven, full of jazz, rap, and Ghanaian highlife–Genesis Owusu's debut album lit up the industry and dominated 2021's Awards Season in its wake.

Ruby Fields
Been Doin' It for A Bit

Since leaving an indelible mark on Australia's psyche in 2017 with breakout single "I Want", Ruby Fields' debut album captured hearts with this straight-shooting paean to growing up.

Skegss
Rehearsal

The Byron Bay rockers have been a staple on Aussie stages and in ARIA charts, and the trio didn't disappoint when they released their booze-fuelled, sucker-punch ARIA number one album *Rehearsal*.

Genesis Owusu

Baker Boy

Tash Sultana
Terra Firma

The Melbourne multi-instrumentalist may have gotten their start busking in Melbourne with street-stopping live-looping and powerful vocals, but Tash Sultana's second album *Terra Firma* became a modern masterpiece.

The Avalanches
We Will Always Love You

The Melbourne crate-digging duo unearthed oldies and goodies at every turn with their third studio album. *Rolling Stone*'s David Browne called it "recombinant pop that feels joyfully seamless and organic".

Tkay Maidza took out Best Record in 2021 with *Last Year Was Weird, Vol. 2*

GENESIS: SUPPLIED, BAKER BOY: SAM WONG FOR ROLLING STONE AU/NZ

Best Single

Nominees

Amy Shark

"Baby Steps"

Sparked by a time when the Gold Coast hit-maker felt utterly defeated, "Baby Steps" has the driving bassline of a Who song and the deft storytelling of Fiona Apple.

Jack River

"We Are the Youth"

A celebration of youth activism, and a reminder of our collective power, "We Are the Youth" became one of 2021's most important songs upon release.

Gang of Youths

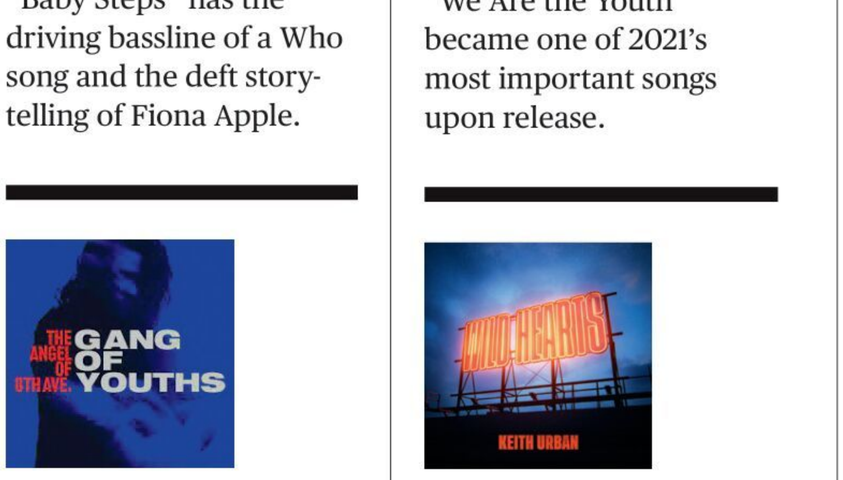
"the angel of 8th ave."

The first single from the band's February-released album *angel in realtime.* was full of glassy acoustic strums, charming percussion, and Dave Le'aupepe's heaven-sent vocals. What more could you possibly want from a Gang of Youths single?

Keith Urban

"Wild Hearts"

An anthemic rallying cry for the uninvited, Keith Urban's genre-crossing chops are on full display in this loosely autobiographical, but indelibly radio-ready, single.



TONES AND I: GIULIA MCGAURAN, RÜFÜS DU SOL: LEFAWN HAWK

Tash Sultana took out Best Single in 2021 with *"Pretty Lady"*

The Kid LAROI

"Stay"

The Kid LAROI earned his first US Number One with his now global hit "Stay". The multi-Platinum collaboration with megastar Justin Bieber took home two ARIA Awards, a Grammy nod, and the number two spot on the triple j Hottest 100.

RÜFÜS DU SOL

"Alive"

Showcasing stirring lyricism and mesmerising broken beat percussion, the Sydney Grammy nominees captured the all-too-familiar highs and lows of the year in transitional turmoil.

Slowly Slowly

"Blueprint"

The Melbourne scene heroes celebrate post-lockdown suburban milieu with this sonic nod to the glory days of emo.

Tones And I

"Fly Away"

Tones And I has always had the ability to create rooms of escapism with her music. On the gospel-influenced "Fly Away", Tones invites us to chase our dreams and find the kind of genuine happiness that she thought she would have as one of the world's biggest music acts.

Global Award

Nominees

Hiatus Kaiyote

Six years since they took on the world with *Choose Your Weapon*, Melbourne's Hiatus Kaiyote returned in 2021 with *Mood Valiant*, an album that showcased their artistry and tenacity, both as people and artists.

Keith Urban

It feels impossible to try and find an artist or fan who hasn't been impacted by Keith Urban's artistry, and while these last two years haven't been ideal for anyone, our September 2021 cover star has powered through and come out on top.

Kylie Minogue

Our Kylie has been at the top of her game for well over three decades and shows no signs of slowing down. Having released fifteenth studio album *Disco* in late 2020, she's still putting Australia on the map at every turn.

Masked Wolf

Masked Wolf and his influence have been truly inescapable over the last two years. Ready to take on the world once again, Harry Michael is on track for big things.

PNAU

From humble beginnings to taking on the world with Sir Elton John, PNAU have never been musicians who do things by halves. It's been a few years between albums, but who's going to complain when global chart domination is on the cards?

RÜFÜS DU SOL

Returning in 2021 with *Surrender*, an album that feels like a comforting hand on the shoulder following a difficult few years, RÜFÜS DU SOL topped charts both here and abroad as they continued their global electronic domination.

The Kid LAROI

The Kid LAROI might be one of the biggest exports Australia has ever produced. With Grammy noms, ARIA wins, and countless other milestones in the works, the future is truly exciting for this proud Kamilaroi rapper.

Tones And I

After "Dance Monkey" turned Toni Watson into a household name, debut album *Welcome to The Madhouse* proved there's nothing Tones can't do.

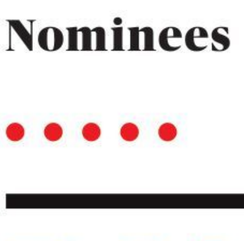
HIATUS KAIYOTE: SUPPLIED, KEITH URBAN: SUPPLIED, KYLIE MINOGUE: DAVID LOPEZ-EDWARDS, KEITH URBAN: TIM ASHTON, MASKED WOLF: SUPPLIED, PNAU: SUPPLIED, THE KID LAROI: BANDON BOWEN, KYLIE MINOGUE: CHARLIE GRAY, RÜFÜS DU SOL: DONSLENS, TONES AND I: GIULIA MCGAURAN

Reader's Choice Award

Nominees

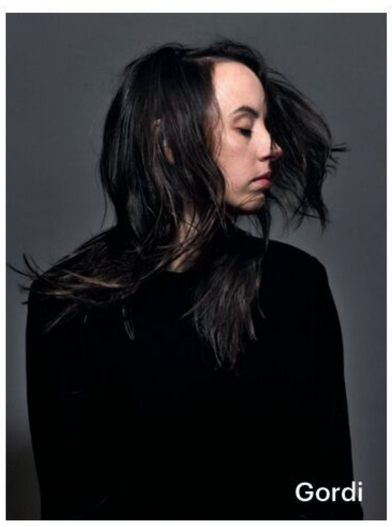
CXLOE

Sharing her critically-acclaimed *Heavy, Pt. 1* EP in 2020, CXLOE burst into 2021 with the release of numerous singles, ensuring that there wasn't a single moment where she left our collective consciousness last year.



Gordi

Between covering the likes of Dolly Parton, or teaming up with partner Alex Lahey for the release of the Nashville-themed "Dino's", 2021 was a big one for Canowindra's Sophie Payten.



Gordi

CXLOE

Holy Holy

Celebrating their tenth anniversary with the release of *Hello My Beautiful World*, Holy Holy provided fans with a mesmerising musical escape from the drudgery of the last few years, blissfully providing a stunning alternative by way of their fourth album.

Jimmy Barnes

One of Australia's hardest workers, Jimmy Barnes came out of 2020's lockdowns with one of his strongest albums in years. Powerful and furious, and becoming his thirteenth number one record, *Flesh & Blood* was as raw and personal as its title implied.

Keith Urban

With 2020's *The Speed of Now Part 1* serving as one of Keith Urban's biggest records to date, 2021 saw him continue that momentum, releasing the personal "Wild Hearts", a track inspired by the notion of refusing to stop chasing one's dreams.

Paul Kelly

Celebrating 25 years of "How to Make Gravy" in 2021, Paul Kelly continued his domination of the Aussie music world, teaming up with the likes of Ziggy Ramo to remake "Little Things", and paying tribute to Adam Goodes on "Every Step of The Way".

RÜFÜS DU SOL

After three years away, RÜFÜS DU SOL returned with the cathartic *Surrender*, storming the local and international charts in the process. A powerful record that proved their worth as true artists, it's easy to see why they're a musical force to be reckoned with.

Vika & Linda

Emerging from lockdown with a gospel record (their first in fourteen years), the beloved sisters continued their revival with *The Wait*. A stellar studio record many years in the making, opinions were unanimous that it was more than worth the wait.

Vika & Linda

CXLOE: DANNY DRAXX, RÜFÜS DU SOL: ELLIOT LEE HAZEL, VIKA & LINDA: BRIAN PURNELL, GORDI: SUPPLIED, HOLY HOLY: SIMON EELES, KEITH URBAN: SUPPLIED, JIMMY BARNES: BENJAMIN RODGERS, PAUL KELLY: MICHAEL HILI

Lisi: A Matter of Perspective

IN 2018, TALISI POASA was pulling 12-hour shifts, five days a week, as a factory machine operator. In between shifts he would post videos of himself spitting bars of hometown pride for his 4300 area code of Goodna in Brisbane. When a few of the clips gained traction on Instagram, he stood behind the mic at his local Six Degrees Studio and recorded his now Gold-certified single "Say Less" in one take. The single—a menacing excoriation of his enemies with slithering rhyme schemes—isn't mixed or mastered. It's raw and pure Lisi, full of fight and underground bite.

"It was never in my mind to make music," he says, speaking from his bedroom. "Because, you know, being an artist is something... especially where I'm from and for our people... We don't really look at it as a pathway, a career to pursue."

The track caught the attention of music industry gatekeepers and at the tail end of 2021 Lisi released his debut album, *Perspective*, with Warner Music and via his own Castille Records. The record cements Lisi as a formidable young rapper on the rise. Lisi swoops in with a one-two punch of rhythmic flow and creative lyricism; he explores his tribulations and ambitions over skittering beats, and pays homage to his Polynesian community.

The track "Brown Brother", inspired by New Zealand artist Poetik, sees Lisi honour the Island nations by weaving in Oceanic language from Samoa, Fiji, and Tonga. "I've got all the Island nations," he smiles. "That's what I feel I carry and represent on my back, Polynesians as a collective."

Community is paramount to the Auckland-born rapper. Lisi understands all too well the trappings of a daily grind where underrepresentation and untold stories mean there are no comparable role models to aspire to. Armed with a befitting self-belief and the enviable rap performance to back it up, Lisi is using his newfound limelight to pay it forward and inspire the youth around him.

"I thought the end of my life was going to be in high-vis and steel caps," says Lisi. "But to be where we are today is... Yeah, it's a true blessing. I got to keep running the ball."

By Poppy Reid

ARE BREED
EST. 2018

Picture This

PHOTOS

Australian and New Zealand artists are constantly turning heads. *Rolling Stone* is here to capture it all.

▶ AMY SHARK

Amy Shark on the Gold Coast working on her follow-up to ARIA number one album *Cry Forever*.

Photograph by Shane Billings

▼ JACK BRATT

Jack Bratt recording his debut album at Hunting Ground Studios in Brisbane. Having been a member of numerous bands over the last two decades, this year saw the 2019 Grant McLennan Fellowship recipient unveil his debut record, *Slow Release*.

Photograph by Joel Myles

▶ KELI HOLIDAY

One half of Peking Duk, Adam Hyde, performed his solo work at the return of LA's School Night, one of the US' most respected live music industry showcases. Rousing the room with his Keli Holiday project, Hyde was the clear stand-out of the evening.

Photograph by Don Adkins

◀ ISABELLA MANFREDI

Isabella Manfredi at Studios 301, recording her debut solo album with Chris Collins.

Photograph by Maclay Heriot

◀ BROODS

BROODS sibling duo Caleb and Georgia Nott in LA giving themselves tattoos. This moment inspired a line in their song "Days Are Passing": *"Shaved my head, gave myself a tattoo / Not that anybody will see".*

Photograph by Noah Beresin

▼ CHARLIE COLLINS

Charlie Collins at Grove Studios recording her second album, *Undone*. "In the midst of COVID it was so incredible to escape to the Grove and spew out all my feelings in the little sanctuary that it became for me over the two weeks I was there. It was a magical experience and I'm so proud of what we created there."

Photograph by Ash Bailey

▲ RÜFÜS DU SOL

RÜFÜS DU SOL at The Piet Suite in New York City. The Sydney band were in the Big Apple for the renowned Governors Ball, performing alongside Billie Eilish, A$AP Rocky, J Balvin, and Post Malone.

Photograph by Shervin Lainez

▲ WHO SHOT SCOTT

Taken in the midst of a three-month lockdown that left the whole of Auckland city in a state of confusion and self-doubt. "I find myself growing more and more thankful for the blessings already close—like going for a stroll with my sister on a sunny day and getting a coffee. Cherishing mundane things we used to take for granted is something I wanted this photo to show."

Photograph by Zainab Al-Saady

◀ NIKO WALTERS

"My happy place. Strolling through the Nikau palm forests in Mangawhai Heads watching for bird and sea life."

Photograph by John Walters

▶ THE BUTLERS

Bradley King (lead guitarist) and Freddy Owens (occasional percussionist/tour mascot) on The Butlers' summer tour. Fun fact: The band's most-streamed EP, *Fredrick's Friends*, is named after Owens.

Photograph by Cam Hay

Stella Bennett is confronting her fears, embracing her idiosyncrasies, and releasing art on her own terms.

BENEE: The Duality *of* A Kiwi Hit-Maker

By Poppy Reid

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LULA CUCCHIARA

Content Warning: This article discusses issues and experiences related to Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Reader discretion is advised.

POPPY REID *is Editor in Chief of Rolling Stone Australia and was shortlisted for Mumbrella's 2021 Editor of the Year.*

A year ago, BENEE was diagnosed with OCD, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. The global chart-climbing artist from New Zealand used to count while driving, softly counting up from one in the belief that if she stopped counting, she would crash and die. She was also convinced that every time she was on a flight, the plane would wind up in a fatal crash, killing her. But now those habits and intrusive thoughts have a name, and with her fluoxetine prescription and weekly appointments with a psychologist, she says she sees the world differently. "They got me out of a hole of having sad showers, now I can have happy showers," she says of the antidepressants, flashing that almost cherubic smile.

Knowledge is power for Stella Rose Bennett, who entered the global stage when her viral hit "Supalonely" reached the Top Ten in 10 countries and received almost seven billion plays on TikTok in one month in 2020—a year before BENEE herself joined the platform. She's still unpacking intrusive thoughts and the brutal fact of death though. Her single "Doesn't Matter", released last October, features the lyrics: *"Now I'm crossing my fingers / Flicking off the switches / Is my house filled with witches?"* and 2020's "Happen to Me" offers her understanding of why people leave this earth by taking their own lives.

"This year it's made me realise how much we need to open this conversation about mental health, and how everyone should have access to therapy and a psychologist," she says. "But obviously it's expensive and it's not that accessible."

It's mid-morning in late 2021 in Auckland when BENEE logs onto a video call with *Rolling Stone*. She's had breakfast and fed her animals (Tui, her dog, and a cat she named Padasio—"It's like a twist on pistachio but I wanted to make it sound bougie"), and as is the BENEE way, she's makeup free, wearing thick layered necklace chains that poke through under baggy clothing. BENEE is music's ultimate cool girl. Her black-dyed hair is cropped at the base of her neck, her pixie cut fringe is the kind many have asked for at the hairdresser but can never style the same after they leave. Not BENEE though, hers sits just right. She has the edge of a new-age punk, a member of Gen Z, she marches to the beat of her own drum and puts her mental health front and centre. Today, for instance, she's planning her next drop on peer-to-peer preloved fashion app Depop. She wants to donate all profits to a charity or help fund psychology appointments for those without access. On World Mental Health Day in October, she posted her annual Instagram timeline gallery of 'crying photos', where she's depicted looking utterly broken at various points across the last 12 months.

"I just got to this point where I was even doing interviews at one stage when I was really not happy at all," she admits. "And then I had this weird thing with myself where I was like, 'Just be honest about it. Say what's up'. You shouldn't feel like a burden for saying 'I'm depressed'."

At time of writing, the Instagram post has over 160,000 likes and 1,600 comments, which range from "You are perfect" to "Your music helps me heal".

"I found something in taking photos of myself when I'm really puffy and sad," she adds. "I'll be able to take a photo and then laugh about it, and then you can look back at that photo and there's something comforting in that, for me at least. So I'm going to keep doing it."

"I had this weird thing with myself where I was like, 'Just be honest about it. Say what's up'. You shouldn't feel like a burden for saying, 'I'm Depressed'."

BENEE creates a space for the multi-dimensional, those who are weighed and often defined by their mental health and illness, but also who are enviably in love with the world, they want to eat it up in one big bite. Perhaps this is why she speaks out about what she believes in on a political level. A few days earlier, some Trump-flag-waving anti-vaccine protesters gathered with around 3,000 demonstrators at New Zealand's Parliament in Wellington. There were reports that some planned to 'arrest' Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern; and if they couldn't do that, they would shoot her.

"I can't really sit there and not post about it," says BENEE. "I found that even when the elections were on in the States—it was the Trump thing—I lost so many followers on the 'Gram, because of all the posts."

Those 'posts' saw BENEE speaking up about the then-US President's long history of racist and misogynistic behaviour. In one Instagram Story post from 2020 she addressed her Trump-loving haters: "[...] get lawstttt," she wrote. "I do hate trump. A lot."

"I got a lot of hate," she says now, "and it was all stuff about people supporting stuff that was racist. And I just," she pauses, thinking, "like you can hate me, you can send me hate, but I don't care."

WHEN BENEE AND I speak again it's on the sun-drenched set of her music video for "Doesn't Matter". It's a hot summer day at Te Haruhi Bay on New Zealand's East Coast and BENEE is dressed for winter. She's wearing a crochet vest over a baggy T-shirt, baggy jeans, and a green and black checked beanie with soft knitted devil horns. It's a two-day shoot, conceptualised and co-directed by BENEE herself. She's going for a French cinema inclination—inspired by the bridge in the song—and she chose this location for its famous black sand beaches and still water.

It's her first time spearheading every single aspect of a visual for her music and this one, she tells me, began with a Pinterest board. A mood board was shared with me prior to this FaceTime call, along with the video's treatment script. The document features photographs of svelte women, blonde and brunette, with cute fringes in fields and on beaches with horses, along with one image of a Sixties red convertible on an unmarked road, and a video still of Tyler, the Creator and his tuba player from his clip for "Lemonhead".

At the top of the script is a logline note from BENEE. It reads: "I'm wanting this music video to be like a short French indie film. It follows my friend

18+

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Tiare & I on a trip to the beach. I want to highlight the lyrics in this song & get super vulnerable with it. I want a lot of the video to be focused on conversation between T & I with me opening up to her and her giving me friendly heart to heart advice."

Watching the video now, it was executed perfectly, especially the final wide shot where the eye is drawn above BENEE and her guitarist Tiare Kelly to clouds melding gently into the shapes of ghostly faces. The final line of the script reads: "The clouds begin to move and merge into little demons (vfx) - the demons in her mind."

BENEE's music videos haven't always played out so seamlessly. An early video for her double-Platinum single "Soaked" was scrapped because, as BENEE explains it, "I was kind of just like, it doesn't really feel very me." Then, in 2018, the clip for "Evil Spider" was abandoned after it also didn't hit the mark.

"We were in LA and we had this huge team," BENEE recalls. "There were extras, there was just... it all looked like, felt like, it was going to be perfect. And the day was just... We were running out of time and it all fell to pieces." She shakes her head, cringing at the memory. "We watched the video and I was like, 'I can't release this. It can't happen'."

BENEE HAS BUILT her career on suburban ennui and self-effacing anxiety. Following the global success of "Supalonely" (the post-breakup anthem she performed live on US TV shows like *Ellen* and *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*), BENEE released her award-winning single "Glitter", which became a TikTok dance challenge, and released collaborations with Grimes (the pure-hearted "Sheesh") and Lily Allen (post-breakup sass single "Plain"). BENEE is about to get a whole lot busier too with her upcoming 62-date global tour, her first headline tour of this size. She tells me she's been readying herself physically for the tour, she's quit drinking and she's taken up kick-boxing and Pilates.

While March brought with it the launch of the tour, so too did it see BENEE release her new EP *Lychee*, a glorious six-track mix of emotions and genres crafted in both her hometown and Los Angeles. While much of it was produced by long-time collaborator and fellow Kiwi Josh Fountain, *Lychee* feels like another species when compared to her past works. At the beginning of 2021, she was writing what she calls "sad girl stuff" and didn't like the way it made her feel when she listened back. *Lychee* flips the script. Unlike her 2020-released album *Hey u x*, which featured many of her favourite artists, *Lychee's* collaborations sit solely in the producer and co-writer credits.

That wasn't exactly by design, however. When we speak again a few weeks later, BENEE is shuffling two things around. She's got plants at home that need to be repotted–"They are all outgrowing their pots"–and she's re-organising the tracks for the EP after the feature artist collaborations fell through.

The EP certainly doesn't suffer for it. There's the summery bop "Beach Boy", written with mega hit-maker Greg Kurstin, who's worked with Adele and Paul McCartney in the past. There's "Never Ending Thing" a dark guitar-driven track with Rostam Batmanglij, co-founder of Vampire Weekend. Then there's her team-up with Kenny Beats (who joined her for "Night Garden" on *Hey u x*) for "Soft Side". And there's the six-minute "Make U Sick", which was originally written for a fashion show. Unfortunately, like the models it had planned to soundtrack, the song never made it down the runway–another COVID casualty. Instead, BENEE released the saucy, beat-laden power-positional as a secret track on the physical deluxe CD version of *Hey u x*. But now the song gets its official digital release on *Lychee*.

As is often the case when it comes to matters of art and creativity, one of the best bits on *Lychee* was a happy accident. BENEE and Kurstin were laying down the vocals for first single "Beach Boy" at his studio in LA when BENEE changed the lyrics from "be my beach babe" to "be my bitch babe".

"We watched the video and I was like, 'I can't release this. It can't happen'."

"He [Kustin] repeated it, this real quiet like dude," BENEE chuckles. "He was like, 'my bitch' and we laughed, and I was like, 'Fuck it. I actually need to record that'."

Fascinatingly, much of the EP's lyrical content is inspired by BENEE's vivid imagination. In the same way her smash hit "Glitter" was sparked after someone poured glitter over her head in a gay club one night in Auckland, new tracks like "Hurt You, Gus" and "Marry Myself" feature entirely fictitious storylines. Gus was a name that just sounded good when BENEE wrote the lyrics and "Marry Myself" stemmed from her desire to create a visual world inside a song.

"I just liked the idea of driving," she shrugs. "I feel that creates this image instantly and so that was definitely me trying to create this visual world where someone proposed to me. I did see a coyote when I was in LA," she says, referring to the line *"Sitting under pear tree / A coyote's staring at me / Seems like a scene from a movie"*. "So I was trying to incorporate that," she continues. "But yeah. I don't know. I just wanted to make a cutesy, dreamy song."

This whimsical disposition teamed with artistic mastery is classic BENEE. She's spontaneous and demonstrably young, but also emanates an air of authority and deep introspection. The two sides of her personality are on full show at the virtual showcase for her label Olive Records in late November. Named after the small salty fruit (because she loves eating them), BENEE launched the label in partnership with her manager Poppy Tohill in 2020. Tonight, she's hosting label signings Muroki and There's A Tuesday... from her living room. During the Q&A following the performances, BENEE is red-faced as she answers a few of the questions coming in on the live stream. Most of the questions are asking her to tour places like Brazil and Peru, but, while noting she's embarrassed at being put on the spot in a live setting, she manages to deflect the focus from herself for a moment to gush about the artist label signings. At the very end of the virtual showcase, just before the stream cuts off, you can hear her mother say exasperatedly, in a very mum way, "Oh my god".

Anyone who has watched BENEE accept an award or has followed her on social media for some time knows she has an enviable relationship with her mum. While some young women spend their formative years avoiding their parents as they find themselves, BENEE has kept her mother, and the advice she's given her, close.

"My mum has always told me that you know–it's even when I'm thinking about breaking up with someone–she's like, listen to whatever it's saying in there," she says, patting her stomach. "You know when something feels right and you know when something feels off. That for me has been what I've really gone by forever, and with every decision that I make. You know in your gut when something feels right and so I just follow that. I hope it leads me in the right direction."

Our time together is almost up and BENEE tells me she's got an appointment with her psychologist later today. Speaking with ease, it sounds like something she's genuinely looking forward to–a normalised part of our overall healthcare plan. Shortly before we say our goodbyes though, the conversation moves toward the one direction she's not headed at the moment: toward a relationship.

"I was just looking at the tour schedule and everything, and just how life is panning out, and I just don't have time for it," she says, showing a maturity that feels far beyond her years. "Unless something comes up where I'm like, 'Oh my god I want to be with this person'," she clarifies. "Like crazy, intense feelings. It just hasn't really got to me yet. I want to be in a relationship with my work."

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WITH NEW ALBUM *RESIST* ARRIVING ALONGSIDE THEIR FINAL TOUR, AUSTRALIAN ROCK LEGENDS MIDNIGHT OIL HAVE ENSURED THEY END THINGS AS STRONGLY AS THEY BEGAN.

MIDNIGHT OIL COME FULL CIRCLE

By TYLER JENKE

Live Photography by JESSE HUNNIFORD

Midnight Oil
kicked off their 2022 tour with an appearance at Mona Foma in Launceston.

JESSE HUNNIFORD, MOORILLA GALLERY

It was a little over five years ago when Midnight Oil did what many fans deemed impossible, announcing their first large-scale tour since their disbandment in 2002. What followed was an immense run of shows that resulted in 77 sold-out concerts across 16 countries, not only cementing Midnight Oil's status as beloved Australian musicians, but proving that even as members forged into their sixties, they were an unstoppable creative force.

In early 2020, the band announced another milestone, revealing that new recorded material–their first since 2002's *Capricornia*–would be arriving later that year. Sadly, even the best laid plans were unable to overcome what would happen next, with the COVID-19 pandemic taking hold and disrupting their intentions for the release of two new albums.

Ultimately, the chart-topping *The Makarrata Project* would arrive in late 2020 (with live shows following soon after), while 2021 would end with the announcement of a new record and the final tour from Midnight Oil. The end of an era.

But before we look at the record that closed out a five-decade career as one of the country's most beloved bands, one needs to take a trip back in time to where their latest recording plans began.

IT WAS IN April of 2019 that Midnight Oil confirmed rumours of new material, revealing their intention to record following the completion of that year's UK and Europe tour. In February of 2020 (just one month before the pandemic took hold), the band announced they would release two new albums in as many years, with plenty of local and international touring complementing their arrival.

Though wide-scale touring plans were unfortunately disrupted, Peter Garrett explains the group felt somewhat empowered by the fact they had new material up their sleeves–material which had, in true fashion, made itself known to the group as soon as they had finished their world tour.

"I don't think any of us really thought we'd end up playing more than half a dozen or a dozen shows," the polymath/frontman/politician/activist recalls of their exhaustive Great Circle tour. "It was more just for the sake of getting the exhilaration of being on stage together, the camaraderie, the weird chemistry, or whatever it is that makes bands work. And if there were people there, fine. But we really didn't expect to be going off to play in South America, the States, Canada, and Europe and all that–that sort of flowed on afterwards.

"When we got back, it was a case of, 'Well, we're able to play, people are bound to have songs, and it's been a while since we've been in the studio, so let's just see what happens when the songs start dropping out and we'll have a go and see if we can record them or not'."

When it came down to the recording of this new material, it was very much like falling into old habits, despite there being quite a while between sessions for the group. While all members of the band had spent time writing and recording, Garrett had utilised the band's break to once again enter the realm of politics.

"'Quite a while' is a beautiful understatement," Garrett says with a slight chuckle. "It felt fine. I mean, everybody kept working, the boys kept on writing and recording when I was banging down the doors in Canberra, and I'd gone off and done my own project as well. If we hadn't been on the stage, a lot of us had been in studios for however long, so it was fine–it was just like getting back together.

"I don't think there were any surprises left as to how we would be personally, but there's always surprises when you attack the music, and that's the fun part."

THE FIRST PART of this new music, *The Makarrata Project*, had initially been set for launch at Splendour in The Grass' 20th anniversary celebrations in July of 2020. Ultimately, lockdowns and cancellations saw this planned launch put on hold, with the record arriving in late October instead.

Tragically, more bad news was forthcoming for Midnight Oil, with longtime bassist Bones Hillman passing away just one week after its release. Having been ill for some time, the group had made peace with Bones' imminent passing, and had received a blessing from him for the band to continue on without him.

"He was very clear about the fact," Garrett explains. "He knew us well enough to know that the only thing that gives you oxygen is to be able to do what you love doing, if you're lucky enough to be in that position.

"You never expect anyone in a band to die. It's incredibly sad, and even though we knew it was coming by the end, you're still not prepared for it. But you get up in the morning, have your muesli, and keep walking."

Ultimately, *The Makarrata Project* was a powerful record. Not only did it give Midnight Oil their first chart-topping release in 30 years, but it featured collaborations with a number of First Nations artists (including Dan Sultan, Tasman Keith, Alice Skye, Kev Carmody, and others), while also furthering themes of reconciliation, including the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (a 2017 statement which campaigns to "provide a voice for Australia's first people within the national government"). A decidedly different record than what they had previously worked on, it was pure Midnight Oil, and it was soon followed by a handful of shows which saw the band bring their *Makarrata Live* show to fans around the country during a brief period of COVID respite.

"With all respect to John [Farnham] and to others, if we say it's the last time we're touring like this, it is."

"It was definitely bittersweet in that we found these collaborations with First Nations colleagues which had really worked well," Garrett notes, "and we'd managed to have something out there which was very like us in some ways, and not like us at all in others, but quite true to the heart of the band.

"My only thought about it is that I just wish we could've done it for a couple of years and taken it to every corner of the country. We were lucky," he says of the shows taking place amid COVID, "we just slipped through, and having all those other performers on stage was quite a liberation."

Despite being unable to bring their collaborative live show as far and wide as they would have liked, the result was a resonant one, with the live performances adding extra context and meaning to the songs which had already been so well received.

"Normally we're not wanting to specifically be directive about songs, even though clearly lots of them have strong views attached to them, but I think in this case we did want to be directive," Garrett explains. "We were hanging off the *Uluru Statement* and everything we sent, by the time we got it back it was better. It jumped up the Richter scale a few notches, and it had more depth, more character, it had more honey in it but it also had more lemon.

"So to get out onto the stage, to get people singing, and to have Alice [Skye] singing as she's playing with Jim [Moginie] on the piano, or having Tasman [Keith] take possession of the stage, or hanging with Troy [Cassar-Daley] at the back or whatever, the whole thing was actually quite an amazing experience. And it'll never be replicated. We're lucky we got out through the door and got some shows in."

OF COURSE, WITH the announcement of two new albums, fans followed on from *The Makarrata Project* with anticipation of what was to follow. In late 2021, the group announced their thirteenth album, *RESIST*, would be complemented by one final tour. Much like their previous record, it too was slated to arrive much earlier, was recorded in the same sessions, and was heavily thematic; this time with a heavy focus on environmentalism and climate change.

"I think that you never really know what's going to pop out, especially when people have been sitting on songs for years," Garrett says of the sessions. "Or not, depending on how long they've been around.

"But it was almost like an urgent symmetry that brought those songs to the fore, and meant that they were the ones we ended up doing, because they hung together very strongly. They resonated with what was going on both in our world and also right around the planet, in the planet's atmosphere, in people's dreams and fears."

The first track released from *RESIST* was the Rob Hirst-penned "Rising Seas", a track which–despite the delayed release–managed to boast a bit of synchronicity when it was released just days before the annual United Nations Climate Change conference in Scotland. While Garrett explains that Midnight Oil don't necessarily stress over how their material is released, he says it's impossible for them to ignore the "mechanics of what's happening in local and world politics".

"We did actually want to be playing in Glasgow at the time, so we thought the record would be out then, but we thought we'd be playing 'Rising Seas', and other songs at the front with all those citizens and all those people that were there making their voices heard," he recalls. "So we never got to go and do the shows, but we had the song ready.

"And we jumped it out because it *needed* to be heard, and there's always going to be issues for people to focus on and to chew on and think about and react to, but this was probably one of the first times where we're seeing certain sections of a country or a policy or an economy literally driven so fiercely by greed and contempt and disrespect, and indifference to the facts."

At its core, *RESIST* is an album that provides a visceral experience to the listener given the current world we live in. Other tracks such as "Tarkine" feature anger directed at a potential new tailings dam proposed for the titular Tasmanian rainforest, while "Reef" discusses the Great Barrier Reef's status as the "most important bit of nature in the world" and how "it may as well just be a garbage depot where we're leaving trash".

But with such powerful messaging, and the record serving as a call to action, will the public listen? Does Garrett, himself a former politician, have faith that politicians in Canberra will actually *listen* to their message, given that many who would gladly listen to "Beds Are Burning" often seem reluctant to the idea of Indigenous rights and reconciliation?

"I think the short answer is that nobody knows, and you can't intuit the motivations of anybody," he explains. "You can [see it a little better] with politicians because they're public figures and they're elected to do a job, but there's a lot of cognitive dissonance in the world.

"A lot of people used to listen to songs like 'Beds', 'The Dead Heart', or 'Blue Sky Mining', and they never would've thought about worker's rights or reconciliation when they were 25, but when they're 35 or 40, they go, 'Oh!', and they have another look at what we're saying.

"But it's not up to us, we're not writing a cookbook where you have to follow a recipe. We're artists, we're just performing and writing songs and saying what we think and doing what we feel is important, and we're really just letting the confetti land on the dance floor when the wedding's over."

However, if any artist is inspired by Midnight Oil to go out there and take action after listening to an album like *RESIST*, Garrett agrees it's simply the icing on the cake.

"I wish everyone was writing songs like this, because we need as many songs like this as possible, in all sorts of idioms from all sorts of artists wherever they might be, we need the airwaves to be full of it, we need the atmosphere to be full of it. We need them to be coming out of the clouds, and we need our music to reflect what it is that we've got to deal with and to inspire us to go on and get the job done.

"Everybody has strong convictions and you can listen to a thousand people sitting on an armchair telling you how the world should work, but you really have to act on it where you can, in a way that uses your attributes and capacities," he continues. "You've got to find your way into it, but that's what it's about–it's about action. It's not about commentary and meditation and reflection; it's about action."

ROBERT HAMBLING

Rolling Stone Australia Editor TYLER JENKE *was named in TMN's 30 Under 30 Awards in 2020 and 2021.*

"We definitely won't be packing our bags and kissing the gumtree and heading off somewhere to be in some far-flung corner of the earth playing to anybody in 2026"

ULTIMATELY, THE RELEASE of *RESIST* spells the end of an era for Midnight Oil. While it doesn't spell the end of creativity for the individual members, it will indeed be complemented by their final tour–something the band intends to stick to without falling into a John Farnham-esque series of reunion tours.

"With all respect to John and to others, if we say it's the last time we're touring like this, it is," Garrett explains. "We wouldn't say it otherwise. We don't need to say it to sell the tickets.

As for the reason behind the decision to cease Midnight Oil operations, Garrett notes the typical album cycle is far longer than people realise. An average process would consist of writing, jamming, recording, rehearsing, and repeating it all, before heading out on the gruelling global promotional circuit, with countless gigs taking up to four years for each album. Though he admits it's not necessarily a *tedious* process, it is however a long one, and not one the band wants to be doing in their early seventies, especially given their undying desire to always perform at their peak.

"I think if you go four years from the end of 2022, that tells you the story," he notes. "We definitely won't be packing our bags and kissing the gumtree and heading off somewhere to be in some far-flung corner of the earth playing to anybody in 2026; it's just not likely to happen. It's not something we'd want to be doing, and it's not something we'd necessarily be able to do easily.

"There's a sunrise and there's a sunset, and you have to get off stage before the sunset. That doesn't mean that you're not going to be writing songs at night time, it doesn't mean that people won't go out and play them–of course they will, some of us will be playing literally until we get dragged off the stage by a shepherd's crook, or go down in the middle of the middle eight."

So what does the future hold for Midnight Oil? With touring wrapping up, fans won't have the notion of gigs to look forward to, but that doesn't mean we've heard the last of the band's members.

"It won't be the last chance they get to hear people write music," Garrett explains. "I mean, everybody will be writing and recording through different connections and Rob will do a record with his daughter [country musician Jay O'Shea], Jim will do a record with somebody. But that's definitely it in terms of touring.

"This is the end of a cycle in Midnight Oil's life where we did big large-scale tours." ®

Peter Garrett
pictured performing with Midnight Oil in Launceston in January of 2022.

JESSE HUNNIFORD, MOORILLA GALLERY

National Affairs

Unsheltered: Byron Bay's Rough Sleeping Epidemic

As COVID-19 gathered casualties across Australia, Byron's housing crisis reached a tipping point. This is the story of Byron Bay's "unseen homeless".

By ROLAND ELLIS

HUNDREDS, IF NOT thousands, of people are living in their cars because there is nowhere else. They roam the highways at night looking for a safe spot to pull over for a few hours sleep. One couple gets lucky and finds an old abandoned bus to lay up in. Others are parking and sleeping on the sides of hills from where they can see enforcement officers coming before it's too late. Others are setting up makeshift encampments in bushland or over behind the sand dunes where they hope not to be noticed. All too often these desperate people are either stranded retirees, or young single mothers with one or two kids under their care.

Where do you think this is happening? East Sudan? Syria? The Polish-Belarusian border? While one can be certain that all of the above and much worse is happening in such well-known epicentres of tragedy, it's not what I'm talking about here. Far, far from it.

ILLUSTRATION BY Katie Taylor CREATED ON IPAD PRO USING APPLE PENCIL (2ND GENERATION)

WELCOME TO BYRON Bay. Australia's ultimate hype village in New South Wales where upwards of two million tourists arrive every year to experience the warm climate, the beaches as picturesque as any Brett Whiteley brush stroke, and what has become an iconically laid-back lifestyle couched in countercultural aesthetics and values. In the past, newcomers would usually go home after the high-seasons or music festivals were over. The place would then fall back into the hands of its roughly 35,000 permanent residents for a few quiet months. But nowadays... not so much.

Last year, COVID-19 triggered a mass exodus from the big cities in favour of small towns and remote work. This phenomenon has affected Byron Shire perhaps more than any other region in Australia. There's its growing community of A-list celebrities–Damon, DiCaprio, a buffet of Hemsworths–and influencers whom we hear so much about. Then there are the other less prominent, but hardly less affluent types who have moved up in droves from Sydney and Melbourne since the beginning of the pandemic. Property prices have skyrocketed as a result of this influx. A two bedroom house in Byron will now cost you about as much as one in the eastern suburbs of Sydney.

This is the prevailing image of Byron in the early 2020s: one of laid-back luxury in the extreme. Beautiful tan bodies laying posed on glittering beaches. Others out walking the quaint streets in flowing linens, furtively swiping black Amex cards while they're at it. What such an image fails to capture, however, is the crisis unfolding just beneath the surface and beyond the social media framelines.

MANDY NOLAN SPEAKING AT THE 'NUDE AIN'T RUDE' RALLY IN 1997.
Photograph by John McCormick

Surges in popularity and demand for housing have in fact placed immense pressure on much of the pre-existing community in Byron Shire. Those who rent have faced average rental increases of approximately 34% over the last 12 months, and there is no sign these increases are about to let up. Then there are the many locals who have been displaced by landlords who decided they can make more money by permanently listing a property on a short-term rental platform such as Airbnb.

The locals who have been forced out of their homes, either by rent hikes or the short-term rental market, are often finding themselves with nowhere to go. Where the statewide housing vacancy average hovers around 3.9%, in Byron Shire only 0.3% of residential real estate stands unoccupied. There is basically no social housing to speak of in the area, nor are there any temporary accommodation or crisis accommodation options, as Ianna Murray, a caseworker from the Byron Bay Community Centre, told me. The one and only (somewhat) nearby shelter, which is an hour away in Tweed Heads, has been deemed by evaluators as "grossly inappropriate" for anyone to be housed in.

All of these conditions have essentially coalesced to create a burgeoning homelessness crisis in Byron Bay. There are more documented homeless in Byron right now than anywhere else in the state, excluding Sydney. Even then, as the head of Byron Council's rough sleeping initiative, Celeste Harris, says, the numbers of rough sleepers in Sydney are actually decreasing, "whereas in Byron they are going up". "The trends are not great," says Harris.

The most recent street count by NSW's Department of Communities and Justice estimates there are 198 people sleeping rough in Byron Shire. That might not sound like a lot, but what street counts such as this typically fail to recognise is the number of displaced peoples living in a given area. In other words, those who might not identify as homeless but are nonetheless living without a stable address. Instead of their own residence, these people typically sleep in cars, vans, or tents, or on friends' couches. Another way to think of them, says Shannon Burt from local council, is as the "unseen homeless".

Of course, firm numbers of unseen homeless in Byron Bay are difficult to come by. But no one has any doubt there are a lot of them around. "There is a huge data gap," says Burt. "We know what we know from the street counts, but then there's this whole other group of displaced people. I do know from my officers going out that there is an increasing number of people presently congregating in various parts of our Shire just because they're stuck with nowhere to go."

Sama Balson, who runs a local community organisation called the Women's Village Collective (WVC), estimates there could be upwards of 2,000 women currently living in insecure and unseen circumstances in and around Byron. "I'm seeing so much of it," says Balson. "We're not talking about people who have addiction issues here, and we're not talking about people who aren't employed. We're talking about nurses, pre-school teachers–these are the people I'm seeing. Key workers in the lower income brackets who have been forced out of their homes by skyrocketing prices."

Balson has been working with one young woman who has two degrees, works full time for a local company, and has a daughter in one of the local schools. "They have been homeless for the past five and a half months, sleeping in their car," says Balson. WVC has managed to find housing for this mother and daughter in the Shire in recent weeks, but they are among the lucky few to be extended a helping hand. In one 24-hour period not long ago, Balson received calls from seven different mothers facing eviction due to untenable hikes in rent. "They had nowhere to go and three weeks to find a place," she says.

Similarly tragic stories keep piling up in Byron at the moment.

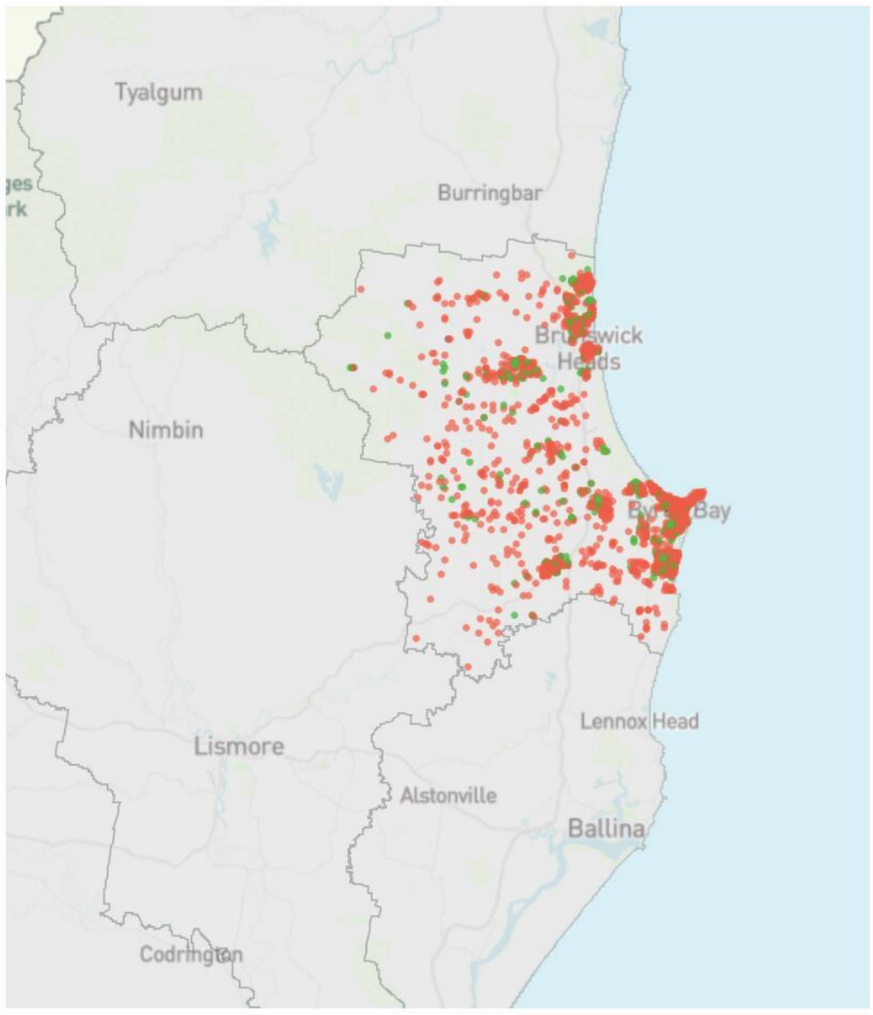
In the week prior to our conversation, Ianna Murray from the community centre had been working with one woman facing eviction from the local campground where she has lived for the past two years. "This is a 44-year-old woman who's currently undergoing treatment for cancer, she's just about to go back for her second round of chemo, and she was just given a letter from the campground people saying she had to be out immediately," says Murray. Staying in a campground for more than 28 days is technically prohibited in Byron. Until recently, though, the campground owners had looked the other way in this case (which happens a lot, so I was told) because the tenant had always paid her rent on time using money she made from her work as a cleaner. "Never missed a payment," says Murray. But now that she has been evicted she has very few options other than to sleep in her vehicle while juggling chemo and a job.

"I did manage to book her a couple of nights at a place that will bring her up to next week," an exhausted and frazzled-sounding Murray told me. In the meantime, Murray was intending to try to find this woman a more permanent living solution. As to the question of what would happen if she was unable to do so, Murray lamented, "Well, this is just the reality we're faced with. We can only do so much. I'm super transparent with the people that we support about the current climate. We can only do so much, and I have to accept that so I can sleep at night."

"In the past, homeless people were usually those who had severe and complex needs. Now it's my friends."

To reiterate, many of the people who are currently facing homelessness in Byron Shire have jobs. Often they are full-time employees. Or as Celeste Harris explains, "in the past, homeless people were usually those who had severe and complex needs. Now it's my friends." Of course, that is not to say those who do have severe and complex needs should be overlooked. It does, however, make this issue seem all that much more stark and close to the bone.

Australian writer, filmmaker, and academic ROLAND ELLIS *lives and works in New York City.*



THE "INSIDE AIRBNB" MAP OF BYRON SHIRE.
Of the roughly 13,000 properties in Byron Shire, around 3,500 are listed permanently on Airbnb.

As Jean Renouf, co-founder of not-for-profit Resilient Byron told me, the fact that so many of the homeless now have jobs "makes the old Australian adage of a 'fair go' seem like nothing but empty words".

In addition to affecting working people, the current crisis also seems to be disproportionately affecting women in Byron. Unfurling exactly why that's the case would require deep research beyond the scope of this article, but Balson does have some thoughts. For one, she says, "women are on average retiring with 47% less superannuation than men, and as a result a lot of elderly single women are faced with housing insecurity later in life."

Balson has also seen several instances where single mothers have been court-ordered to stay within a 50-kilometre radius of an ex-partner who lives in the area, even if that ex-partner is paying zero in child support and offering no other help in terms of co-parenting. "So all the burden is falling on the mother in these cases, and she's often finding herself trapped in insecure housing as a result," says Balson. In Balson's view, the gender-biassed nature of the crisis is just further evidence of inequalities that have long been baked into an Australian system that treats women—in particular single women and single mothers—as second-rate citizens worthy of little acknowledgement or support.

Despite best efforts to stay hidden, Byron's to-date largely unseen homeless population has inevitably started to spill over into the public eye. "We're receiving a lot of complaints lately from community [residents] who have just moved in, and suddenly they are seeing people across the street camped in a van, or people in the bush, and they don't like what they see," says Shannon Burt. "Before COVID you wouldn't see it so much," says Renouf. "But now it's become such an obvious crisis that you just can't ignore it."

The question becomes, what can be done to stop the already spiralling situation from getting worse?

COUNTERCULTURAL ROOTS RUN deep in Byron Bay and its surrounds. It's not just an image; real hippies and social justice warriors do exist here in numbers and have done so for a long time. This is the community that banded together to keep out corporate giants like McDonald's and Club Med. For months on end they came together to form the Bentley blockade, ultimately putting a stop to fracking in the region before it could begin. A series of progressive councils, working alongside highly motivated community organisers, have successfully managed to keep Byron from turning into another Surfers Paradise, with its gaudy skyline and rampant over-commercialisation. Now those same groups are banding together again to fight back against homelessness in an attempt to keep some semblance of their historically diverse, eclectic, and balanced community intact.

Help is coming from almost all directions. There is the aforementioned Sama Balson and WVC. There are the likes of Ianna Murray and Kate Love at the community centre, Shannon Burt and Celeste Harris at local council. There is the prominent local comedian, writer, and now, Greens politician, Mandy Nolan, who is trying to bring attention and political action to the issue. There are the many local NGOs, including Resilient Byron which works to "build the resilience and regenerative capacities of the residents"; and Orange Sky which provides both shower and laundry facilities to the local homeless community.

Even some local property developers have stepped up. Brandon Saul, a self-described "accidental property developer" and co-founder of some of the region's biggest music festivals, including Splendour in the Grass, has put up money to fund local shower and breakfast programmes. He has also been one of the key backers of a newly opened "homeless hub" called Fletcher Street Cottage—which is linked to the local community centre. The goal of Fletcher Street, says Saul, is to "provide wraparound services for homeless people and those in danger of becoming homeless: everything from arranging doctor and accountant appointments, to helping people to locate housing".

In the first month of the fundraising campaign for Fletcher Street, the project raised over $400,000. "And that was right when the lockdown started too," says Saul. "We had everyone from a previously homeless person giving $10 per week, up to Chris Hemsworth giving $125,000 for Fletcher Street," says Kate Love from the community centre. "It goes to show," adds Saul, "that the underbelly of Byron's community is good with a capital G".

Still, the words of Ianna Murray carry weight: "We can only do so much." It's true. The community itself cannot be expected to fix this problem on its own. They need state and federal governments to step in and provide support. "Without government support," Saul told me, "we are really only talking about band-aid solutions here."

First and foremost, says Mandy Nolan, "we need policy that strictly limits Airbnb and other short-term rental providers in the area". Of the roughly 13,000 properties in Byron Shire, around 3,500 are listed permanently on Airbnb at the moment. Saul showed me a satellite map called "inside Airbnb" which indicates these short-term properties using red dots. The dots are so densely clustered in Byron that it looks like the area has some sort of malignant rash. "That's the real epidemic right there," says Saul. Theoretically at least, placing strict limitations on short-term rental letting would free up some, if not most, of those 3,500 Airbnb properties for permanent tenants again, in turn alleviating a good deal of the pressure in the housing market. "If we don't have policy to manage Airbnb, we're screwed," says Saul.

So far, the state government has not come to the table on this issue. Local council went to state legislators in recent months and offered to retain Airbnb in certain areas (the tourist-centric area of Wategos Beach, for example) for 365 days per year. In exchange, they wanted it banned in other predominantly residential neighbourhoods in order to keep them exclusively residential. State government rejected that proposal. Council then went back and requested Airbnb be limited to 90 days per year in those neighbourhoods. That proposal has also been rejected in recent weeks. According to the council, it's looking like a 180-day-per-year plan might be accepted. But, as Saul says: "If they're still getting $2,000 per night for 180 days per year, landlords will remain incentivised to leave the properties on Airbnb. That could work out even worse, with properties then sitting literally empty for half the year."

IT'S NOT JUST the Airbnb issue that state legislators are refusing to engage on. State government has also refused to implement a "bed tax", which would essentially tax short-term rental users and other visitors, in turn providing some much needed revenue to local council. Legislators have also ignored petitions for the abolition of "no cause" evictions, whereby landlords are able to evict tenants with "no cause" by simply providing 90 days written notice. There are no plans to develop any community housing or crisis accommodation options in the area. Local council has managed to cobble together its own funding for a few full-time public liaison officers, who are charged with going out into the community and interfacing with rough sleepers about their needs, but no personnel funding has been provided by state or federal governments to help manage the issue. "There is definitely a disconnect between funding provisions and need in the community," says Celeste Harris. "The dire stats in Byron are clear, but state government is still not acting."

"The frustration I have every day," says Shannon Burt at the local council, "is that I come here and I advocate for certain types of changes to planning controls and other types of support on this issue, and I get crickets from state, or I get resistance because it's not neat. I then have to go back to those people who are crying for help and say, 'I'm sorry, just a little bit longer'."

SUPPLIED

STATE AND FEDERAL governments seem to be telling Byron that it's on its own. According to Mandy Nolan, that's exactly what's happening. "Neither of the major parties is willing to get in the way of investment or throw business under the bus in any way, but they'll throw people, community, the vulnerable, under it no problem," says Nolan.

The reality is that without real systemic change and government support, the crisis only looks set to get worse. "We are trying to hold the space," says Kate Love at the community centre. "But it's not sustainable in the long run for us to hold this together on our own."

It's not just Byron facing housing shortages, widening equality gaps, and increasing homelessness. Rather, Byron is something of an overheated test case for a much deeper issue that is gradually spreading its way across the state and the country at large. Recent data from the Community Housing Industry Association NSW shows the state currently has a shortage of at least 70,000 social housing dwellings. With growing demand and drastic shortfalls in supply, it only makes sense that those already facing financial strain will continue to be squeezed toward breaking point. Numbers of homeless, either seen or unseen, seem almost destined to increase as a result.

I currently live in America. Generally speaking, the US has long been on the warpath against the public sector. Public housing and social services have been grossly underfunded for years, not to mention public health and education. The prevailing thinking has been that deregulated markets would effectively regulate themselves and provide for everyone in turn, thereby bolstering the rich and poor alike. There would therefore be no need to spend on public programmes. We all know by now that this idea hasn't really worked out. Instead the rich are now mega rich, while the formerly working class have largely found themselves in dire straits with virtually no social safety net to fall back on. Many have consequently fallen into homelessness.

I recently visited Portland, Oregon, where it's impossible not to notice the vast population of homeless living in tent cities that line the streets of the downtown area. Scratch the surface in any major American city and you are likely to find a similar scenario—thousands of desperate people camped out in plain sight. Every night, more than 500,000 Americans experience homelessness. I for one would hate to see the cities and towns in my own country go this same way. But based on the current trajectory of things in Byron and elsewhere—coupled with government's continued insistence on the American approach to policy making at the expense of the public—it's very difficult to see it going any other way. ®

JON TYSON, UNSPLASH

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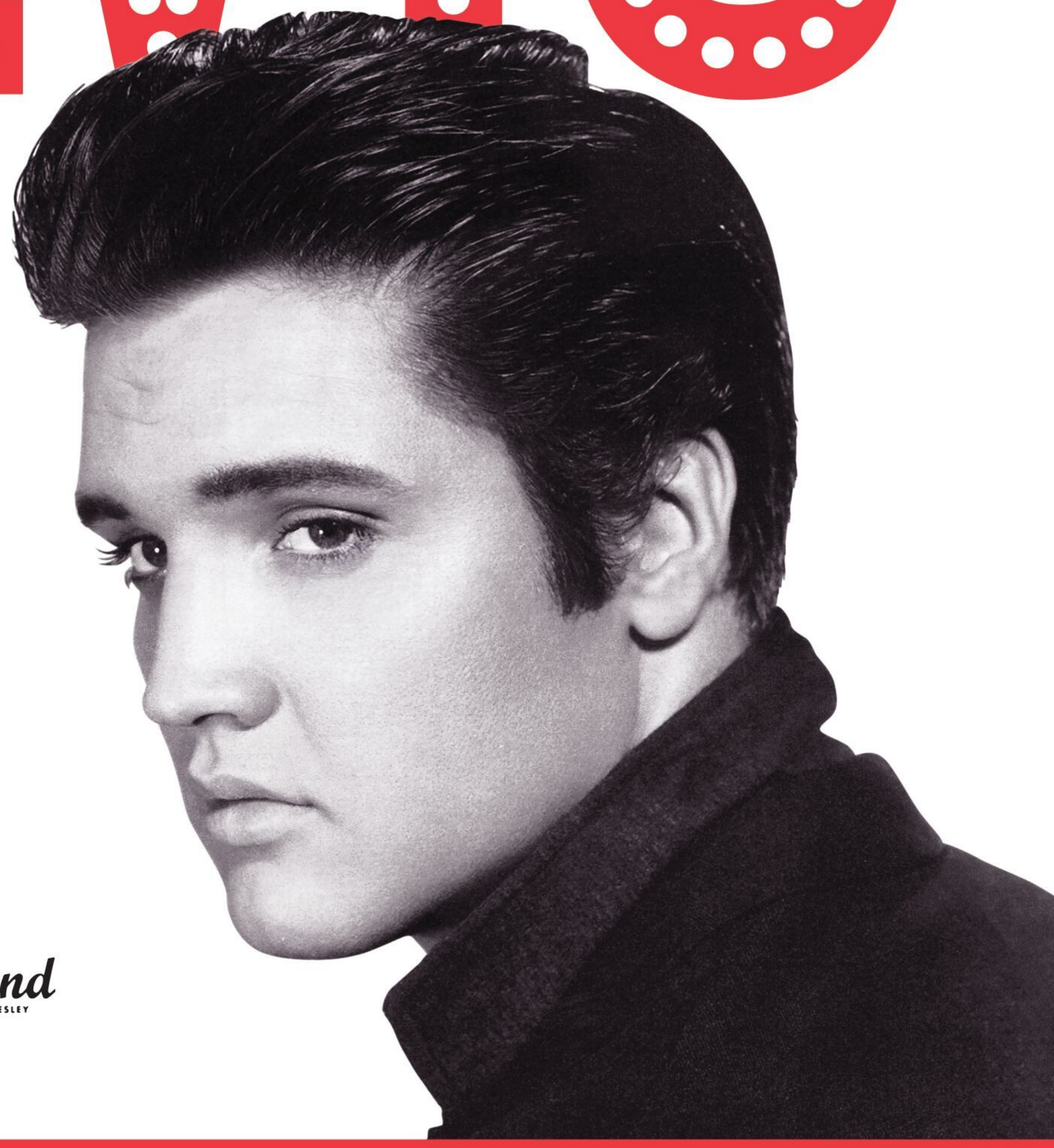

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Glowing Green

Just how clean is nuclear energy, and should Australia get onboard?

By JAMES SHACKELL

CLIMATE

THE LITTLE PLANE zoomed low over the Kakadu scrub, barely 100 metres off the ground. Monsoon forests stretch away on all sides, and in the distance, the turquoise smudge of Van Diemen Gulf. Instruments Operator Frank Lanzer kept his eyes on the gamma ray spectrometer.

A few months earlier, Neil Armstrong's boot had made contact with the surface of the Moon, but today the three men in the plane had their minds fixed firmly downwards. Up front, pilot Bill Hay and navigator Harvey Morton looked out at the baked green landscape. They were searching for something. Combing the dusty nothingness of Australia's Northern Territory.

As the Britten-Norman Islander banked low over Mount Brockman, known as Djidbidjidbi to the local Mirarr people, Lanzer's spectrometer suddenly exploded into life, fibrillating like a heart attack. The year was 1969. The three men in the plane, part of an aerial radiometric survey, had just discovered Ranger, one of the richest bodies of uranium in the Southern Hemisphere.

Welcome to the modern nuclear debate. Pull up a seat and grab some popcorn.

Ranger wasn't the first, or the last, uranium mine in Australia. People have been aware of the country's lucrative deposits since the 1890s. We've got almost 35% of the world's natural uranium, quietly pulsing away inside the bedrock, just waiting to be drilled out, crushed, soaked in sulfuric acid, converted to gas, whipped in a centrifuge, turned *back* into powder, compressed into tiny black cylinders, fed into fuel rods, then bombarded with neutrons, until its subsequent atoms break down and unleash an exponential chain reaction—a controlled nova of heat, light, and (supposedly) clean energy.

Welcome to the modern nuclear debate. Pull up a seat and grab some popcorn.

In some ways, the whole pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear argument in Australia is a wash.

"With low level nuclear waste, companies have to guarantee isolation from people and planet for 300 years."

Regardless of whatever you think about nuclear power, it's been illegal to build or operate a commercial reactor here since 1998. Some people are happy about this. Others are definitely not.

"If you're against nuclear, you often get people saying you're fearful and emotional," says Dave Sweeney from the Australian Conservation Foundation. "But I'm really not. I'm just bored by this consistent circular debate. There's this sense that, if you're pro-nuclear, you're level-headed and reasonable and open to the way the world is. If you're anti-nuclear, you're informed by *The Simpsons*."

On one side of this circular debate, you have the mining industry and the nuclear lobby, who want to see nuclear power worked into Australia's energy mix, and who are definitely *not* motivated by nasty things like profit, whatever you might have heard. The nuclear lobby's argument is complicated, but basically boils down to: we're less shit than coal. Which is not, in fact, a bad argument.

On the other side, you have people like Sweeney: environmentalists, anti-nuclear campaigners, and (to be frank) most of the scientists, who say nuclear energy isn't just dangerous, but a massive distraction that could delay decarbonisation and sink the entire planet.

This debate has been swirling around and around, without resolution and with increasing bitterness on all sides, for about 70 years. The battle lines have pivoted recently, which is why you're hearing so much media chatter about nuclear energy—conservative talking heads who have spent 20 years denying climate change, suddenly positioning themselves as nuclear scientists, swooping in to save the world.

JAMES SHACKELL *is a Melbourne-based freelance writer and regular contributor to Red Bull, Frankie, and Urban List.*

After the Fukushima disaster in 2011, when global uranium prices tanked, the nuclear industry realised the old PR line wasn't going to fly anymore, especially with renewable tech becoming annoyingly powerful, efficient and—even worse—cheap. So they changed tack. The new stance became: nuclear isn't better than renewable power, it *is* renewable power. And that flip, as cynical and transparent as it might have been, completely changed the game.

THE CLOSEST THING Australia has to a nuclear power station is the OPAL reactor at Lucas Heights in southern Sydney. It's a futuristic sunken pit about the size of a backyard swimming pool, used for research and nuclear medicine (a niche subset of radiology where radioactive materials can help diagnose and treat things like thyroid cancer and lymphoma). For over 65 years, Lucas Heights has been where the majority of Australia's—admittedly small—nuclear waste has been stored.

DAVE SWEENEY
(AUSTRALIAN CONSERVATION FOUNDATION)
IN THE KIMBERLEY.

Which leads us to the zillion dollar question surrounding nuclear power: what do you do with the waste?

After 70 years and billions of dollars' worth of research, the world's best scientists haven't been able to come up with a great answer to that question. We currently take the spent fuel (which looks like gummed-up Martian sludge—not neon green slime), wrap it in special heat-resistant glass, chuck it in a tin or copper canister, stamp that with the iconic radioactive trefoil, and bury it. That's it. That's the best we've come up with. But hey, it's slightly better than 50 years ago, when standard industry practice was to drag barrels into international waters, where no one can get sued, and simply push them over the side.

"With low-level nuclear waste, companies have to guarantee isolation from people and planet for 300 years," says Sweeney. "Which is a figure you can predict with some degree of certainty. The issue kicks in when you move up the waste scale. Intermediate waste needs to be isolated for 10,000 years. And high level, that's the show stopper, needs to be isolated for over 100,000 years. How can you possibly guarantee that? You can't. And who do you sue in 58,000 years' time when things didn't go to plan?"

Here's the problem: no country on Earth has been able to build a high-level radioactive waste disposal site. It literally doesn't exist yet.

For one thing, it's political poison, at least here in Australia. How do you convince a local community that their backyard has been chosen as the lucky dumping ground for arguably the worst thing ever created by humanity? Potentially leaking invisible death in every direction? No one wants that on a campaign bumper sticker. As nuclear advocate-turned-critic Bob Carr puts it: "Where is the shire council putting up its hand to host a nuclear power plant? Harder to find than a sponsor for a high-temperature toxic waste incinerator."

Finland might offer a glimmer of hope. It's currently breaking ground on a Deep Geological Nuclear Waste Repository, where high level radioactive waste can be 'safely' buried way, way down—450 metres down—deep in the billion-year-old Finnish bedrock. America and Germany have dabbled with similar projects in the past (with limited success) but Finland's site is being marketed as a "game changer". NASA is also working on plans to build a nuclear power station on the Moon, which it says could be ready to launch by 2026. And, no, this is not a joke.

Sweeney calls radioactive waste an "intergenerational threat". It's the big, slam-dunk argument against nuclear power as a 'clean' energy source. How can the industry market itself as 'green' when it's pumping out 100,000 years' worth of pollution? Nuclear reactors might produce a relatively small *volume* of waste—some estimates claim that *all* the waste from *all* America's reactors, ever, could fit onto a single football field. But a bullet is pretty small, too. Size is only one metric of potential harm, and arguably not the most important one, especially when it's pointed at your head.

"Nuclear power, in our view, is like a binge on a credit card," says Sweeney. "It might sound like it works at the time, but all it's doing is delaying who pays the price. It's cost-shifting a cold beer and hot shower today to future generations forever."

BUT LET'S SAY you ignore the waste. Just push that icky, radioactive, unresolved issue to one side for a minute. How does nuclear power stack up against other energy sources? And is it really 'zero emission' technology?

This is the big argument you'll hear wheeled out by the nuclear lobby and conservative talk radio

shows: that unlike fossil fuels, nuclear produces zero carbon dioxide. And that's technically true–for the reaction itself. Nuclear fission makes heat, light, and energy, which boils water, which turns to steam, which spins the turbine. So far, so good. That's where 70% of France's electricity comes from. Nuclear fission helps firm the grid in England, China, America, Finland, South Korea, and dozens of other pro-nuclear countries around the world.

But this argument neatly sidesteps what they call 'lifecycle emissions'. That is, all the *other* stuff you have to do to make a functioning nuclear reactor. And that stuff definitely produces carbon dioxide. There's uranium mining and milling, the enrichment process, fuel fabrication, building the reactor itself, fuel transport, waste disposal, site rehab, the list goes on. This stuff forms the 'carbon debt': or how much energy something has to produce before it becomes a net carbon win.

"It's absolutely not zero emission," says Sweeney flatly. "It's low emission. Every power source has a footprint, and nuclear's footprint, which isn't often factored in, is waste management–effectively forever."

Of course, wind farms and giant solar arrays have footprints, too. Wind turbines, in particular, require a lot of steel and concrete, not to mention copper and aluminium, both of which have to be mined. Current figures differ depending on which camp you ask, but (taking the whole lifecycle into account) wind, solar, and nuclear all seem to have pretty similar CO^2 emissions per gigawatt-hour of electricity produced. In other words, they all deliver roughly the same amount of carbon for your buck. All three are way, way better than coal, of course, which churns out roughly 273 times more lifecycle carbon than nuclear power.

But here's the catch: 12 years ago, nuclear electricity cost roughly 12 cents per kilowatt hour, compared to 14 cents for wind and 35 cents for solar–and that wasn't even factoring in storage (unlike renewables, nuclear reactors can keep the lights running and the juice flowing around the clock; they don't need to rely on batteries). Some experts, not unreasonably, pointed to nuclear's cost efficiencies as a big reason to double down.

But since 2010, the running costs of solar and wind have plummeted, while nuclear has actually gotten *more expensive*–up to 16 cents per kilowatt hour. The economic argument no longer holds heavy water.

"Electricity authorities who don't have a green bone in their body can read a balance sheet and add up figures," says physicist and prominent anti-nuclear campaigner, Professor Ian Lowe. "In the last ten years, on average, wind has come down from 14 cents to 4.1 cents, and solar's down from 35 cents to 3.7 cents. There's even a new solar farm in Portugal which claims to deliver electricity at 1.1 cents per kilowatt hour!"

Most of the world's nuclear reactors were built 30 to 50 years ago, and they're coming to the end of their half-life, so to speak. Many don't even turn a profit anymore. Companies keep them on, Lowe says, because having a functioning nuclear reactor on your balance sheet is an asset, even if it doesn't actually make any money. Once it closes down, it's just a big cost sink: old reactors have to be dismantled and cleaned safely, waste needs to be stored, the site might have to be rehabilitated in-line with pesky government environmental standards, and so on. None of which is good for shareholders.

"People who are anti-nuclear want to decarbonise the world, but to do that we need every tech solution we've got, including nuclear energy," says MCA CEO Tania Constable.

Even the latest world nuclear industry status report sounds glum and fatalistic, in a corporate-type way. There are currently 415 reactors up and running around the world, it says; fewer than there were in 2019. Last year, if you take China out of the mix, nuclear power generation dropped to its lowest levels since 1995. In a lot of ways, the industry is shrinking. You might hear that nuclear energy supplies 10% of the world's electricity, which it does, but that actually represents a decline–it was 17.6% in 1996. Renewables, by comparison, are surging, and already supply at least 29% of the world's grid.

No one, not even the pro nuclear lobby, thinks that *Simpsons*-style giant nuclear reactors are the future. There are only two being built in America right now, and their budgets have ballooned out to over $20 billion each. Old-school reactors are simply closing faster than they open. It's hard to get investment groups on board when your product looks like a Soviet propaganda poster.

Even uranium didn't become the golden three-headed goose that Australian federal governments thought it was going to be. The uranium industry currently accounts for about 0.2% of Australia's export revenue, and 0.01% of jobs. That's still a lot of money, about $688 million per year, but to put that in some perspective, we make about 1.5 times more cash exporting cheese than uranium, and you don't hear much about a 'Cheddar-Led Recovery'.

Nope, the future everyone's talking about now goes by another name: Small Modular Reactors (SMRs).

SMALL MODULAR REACTORS are exactly what they sound like–small-scale nuclear reactors, similar to those already found on submarines, which could be shipped on trucks, scaled up and scaled down, and plugged into a country's energy mix. Sort of an IKEA nuclear flat pack... at $3 billion a pop. They're currently being pushed by various governments, special interest groups and corporations as nuclear energy's shiny silver bullet.

"Small modular reactors are still a gleam in the nuclear technocrat's eye," says Lowe. "You can't actually go out and buy one. The closest thing we have is Rolls Royce, who's asked the UK government for £200 million to set up an SMR assembly line. They're basically saying: this isn't economical, but if you give us £200 million, it could be economical."

"SMRs are not even new!" Sweeney laughs. "They've been talked about and promised for over six decades. The stuff that exists, no one wants, and the stuff that people want, doesn't exist."

The point of SMRs, according to critics, is that it gives the nuclear industry a chance to rebadge and reposition. 'Hey, rapidly collapsing world, don't invest in clunky old reactors, invest in this cool new modular technology! It has its own acronym!'

"They've got a nice communications line, which is: you don't think of the Wright Brothers when you get on a Qantas flight," Sweeney says. "But even good comms is no solution to absent technology."

The problem is, small modular reactors, if we're being picky, *literally do not exist*. They're a cool idea, in theory: scalable nuclear reactors that, allegedly, can't meltdown. Scientists have been sketching them on blackboards since the Seventies, but nobody has ever actually built one. The closest is Russia's floating nuclear power station, bobbing in the East Siberian Sea, which Sweeny says isn't really an SMR at all ("It's a reactor on a boat," says Sweeney).

Moreover, there are no guarantees that SMRs will even do what they say on the pack. Again, we're dealing in hypothetical future technology here, hoverboards and perpetual motion-type stuff. A 2020 CSIRO study put SMRs at roughly four times the operating costs of proven renewables, and even Rolls Royce acknowledges it'll take billions of dollars and ten years to get their modular reactors up and running–arguably way too late to solve the climate crisis.

The big question seems to be: why invest in untested nuclear technology (whose early estimates are sketchy at best) when you have proven renewables right here and now, getting better and cheaper all the time? "We're talking hundreds of billions of dollars over multiple decades on the chance that it *might* work," says Sweeney. "If we did the same with renewables, we could take massive steps to decarbonise."

RANGER URANIUM MINE
IN AUSTRALIA'S NORTHERN TERRITORY.
Photograph by Dominic O'Brien.

Of course, SMRs still have their fans, including the Minerals Council of Australia (MCA), whose job it is to advocate for mining interests, including uranium. The MCA released a report in 2021 spruiking the benefits of SMRs, and why they should form a vital part of Australia's energy mix.

"We're saying that nuclear energy should be *one* option," says MCA CEO Tania Constable. "People who are anti-nuclear want to decarbonise the world, but to do that we need every tech solution we've got, including nuclear energy. We need to put aside our philosophical opposition. If we don't take advantage of emerging technologies, we're making decarbonisation harder, not easier."

It's a fair point, in many ways, and most nuclear proponents aren't actually advocating for 100% nuclear, or anything like it. Their argument is more subtle. Renewables can't get us to net zero by themselves, they say, so let's boost the grid with something better than gas and coal. Of course, 'better' is a relative term, especially when it comes to high-level radioactive waste, and the argument that renewables alone can't save the planet is heavily contested. There are already three countries running at pretty much 100% renewable power: Iceland, Paraguay, and Costa Rica.

It all comes back to opportunity cost, Sweeney says. Most people agree we have a finite amount of time left to solve the climate crisis (the general consensus is that the next ten years are make-or-break) so every dollar we invest in coal, or gas, or nuclear power, is a dollar that doesn't go elsewhere. Every discussion and sub-committee into a bright nuclear tomorrow pushes back decarbonisation, and moves the doomsday needle a smidge closer to midnight.

Doug Parr, chief scientist for Greenpeace in Britain, puts the whole SMR thing more bluntly: "It doesn't solve the problems for society; it solves the problems for the nuclear industry."

THE RANGER URANIUM mine makes for an interesting little nuclear parable. It opened for business in 1980, 11 years after Frank Lanzer's discovery, full of hope and political optimism. This was the atomic golden age. The plan was to turn Australia into the Saudi Arabia of uranium, and over the next few decades, ore from Ranger was sold and shipped to nuclear power stations in Asia, Europe, and North America.

But promises of a global nuclear utopia never really materialised. 40 years later, when Ranger finally closed, an unprofitable hole in the ground, it had only exported 3,000 tonnes of uranium per year—far less than the 30,000 tonnes originally promised. Along the way, the mine notched up roughly 200 documented 'incidents' ('incidents' is an industry term, presumably borrowed from Exxon Valdez) including a tank collapse in 2013, which spilled one million litres of acidic radioactive sludge into the stormwater system.

Now Ranger sits dormant—a deep gash inside the World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park—waiting for Energy Resources Australia, a subsidiary of Rio Tinto, to rehabilitate the site, which it's obligated to do by 2026.

Some of this work has already started, which is great. Native plants are sprouting on the skeleton of the old mine. Animals will one day come to live here, just like Chernobyl's exclusion zone. Energy Resources Australia is even working with the local Mirarr people (who never consented to Ranger in the first place and have spent 40-odd years campaigning against the mine) to help fold the site back into Kakadu National Park.

WILLIAM WATSON AND DAVE SWEENEY PICTURED AT THE KALGOORLIE SUPER PIT.
Photograph by Jess Boylan.

And so, ironically, Ranger might now represent the most important function of the entire atomic industry, which is simply cleaning up after itself.

"The nuclear industry has benefited from political privilege, money, and access for six decades," says Sweeney. "As an electricity producer, their time is coming to an end, but their responsibility to manage the waste they've created is not. If that's the future of a continuing nuclear industry, I'm on board. I'll put a nuclear sticker on the back of my bike."

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THERAPY:

No longer relegated to the pages of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, psychedelic substances are being considered seriously as effective treatments for mood disorders and addiction.

OPENING OUR MINDS TO ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS

By Nick Boyce

THE GUESTS STAND in a circle digging their own graves. They're forced to lie in them while people above scatter dirt over their prostrate bodies. Dappled sunlight filters through tropical vegetation while an ethereal figure standing in the centre rattles off platitudes in a thick accent. This is how one of the therapy sessions plays out in the recent fictional series *Nine Perfect Strangers*. The retreat owner Masha, played by Nicole Kidman, invites a select group to her wellness retreat and then has them drink psychedelic substances without their knowledge or consent. Unbeknownst to them, the guests start their day with a breakfast smoothie laced with psilocybin (magic mushrooms) and spend most of their time relaxing in the lush grounds of a Californian retreat. There's the odd acupuncture session and the occasional group activity, but not much in the way of clinician-assisted therapy. The show flirts with the idea of psychedelic therapy, but, as you might expect from a drama based on a novel, it's a far cry from reality.

There are currently plenty of scientific studies underway looking at treating mental disorders with the help of psychedelic substances. According to an article in the Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, in 2021 there were approximately 100 clinical trials around the world using psychedelics. These are not tropical getaways for the wealthy, but rigorous evidence-based trials which could change the way we look at mental health treatment.

Scientists and doctors are experimenting with substances commonly considered recreational drugs, rather than seen as medicines. The trials include the use of psychedelics like LSD (acid), ayahuasca, and psilocybin. Even party drugs like MDMA and ketamine, which aren't strictly psychedelics, are being used to treat serious disorders. While most of these are prohibited substances in Australia, they're being used increasingly in research. Ketamine has even been approved in Australia to treat Major Depressive Disorder where other medications haven't worked. And it's not just depression these treatments could help. There's hope that psychedelic therapy could be used to treat generalised anxiety disorder, alcohol and drug dependency, tobacco dependency, and even body dysmorphia.

Despite the sobriquet given to psilocybin, these substances are not being administered as a magic cure. It's not as simple as drinking a smoothie and relaxing poolside at an expensive retreat. Taking psychedelics allows patients to experience themselves in a different way and creates an environment for them to confront repressed traumas. When paired with intense and individualised therapy, evidence suggests this can lead to a significant improvement in some psychiatric disorders.

LAUNCHED IN 2021, the Psychae Institute is an Australian centre which specialises in psychedelic medicine and research. One of its founders, Dr Jerome Sarris, who describes himself as a "tele and strat playing tragic" and has an impressive collection of custom guitars, is one of the world's leading experts on medicinal plants. He has conducted extensive research on ayahuasca, a psychedelic combination of two plants consumed as a 'tea' and used by Indigenous people in the Amazon basin for centuries. According to Dr Sarris, when it comes to taking ayahuasca, "you're forming new connections in your brain while dampening others... you've got all these different interrelations biologically, but then you've got the psychological experience".

Dr Sarris makes it clear that it's still early days, but the studies he's been involved in have indicated ayahuasca's enormous potential. "It's a new frontier, and we're only just finding out what the particular mental health benefits can be, but our data was really quite compelling, showing that people who did report ayahuasca use did have a dramatic reduction in depression, in depressive symptoms, also a reduction in anxiety symptoms... a strong effect on reducing trauma, as well as alcohol and substance use."

Dr Sarris believes that we're in the middle of a "mental health pandemic", and his goal is to provide better healthcare for patients in a safe environment. While his current focus is on treating mental health disorders, he doesn't rule out future research into whether psychedelics could be used to help us tap into our creativity. "In later times I anticipate that attention will turn more formally towards the effects on human consciousness," he explains.

"IT'S A NEW FRONTIER, AND WE'RE ONLY JUST FINDING OUT WHAT THE PARTICULAR MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS CAN BE."

"This can be applied to address broader societal and existential issues, and to enhance psycho-spiritual growth, creativity, and innovation."

Dr Susan Rossell, a specialist in cognition at Swinburne University of Technology, is running a study out of Melbourne using psilocybin to treat major depressive disorder. "We often refer to (psilocybin) as resetting the brain or opening up the brain to new experiences... getting rid of that roadblock that can often be there for people with serious mental health disorders." She sips out of a pink mug with a zebra on it while she talks through her protocol. Dr Rossell is trying to "perfect the ingredients" with varying combinations of dosage and therapy. First, the therapist establishes a rapport over several sessions to better understand the patient's triggers and how they approach their depression. Only then are they invited back to take the psilocybin.

A typical treatment day starts early in the morning as the dose can last for six to eight hours. The patient spends this time in Dr Rossell's clinical suites, which are nothing like the sterile office you might find at your GP; they're filled with plants, pictures, paintings, and a sofa to recline on. Music plays while the patient occupies themselves with crafts or flicks through the pages of art books. While in the safety of Dr Rossell's suites, the therapist monitors the patient to reduce the possibility of a negative encounter. The therapist might gently guide the patient through their experience but there's not necessarily formal therapy during the dosing session. As Dr Rossell explains, "The real work starts a couple of days afterwards, with their mind opened up, then they start to work on the issues that have been identified prior to the therapy." Dr Rossell's trials are still ongoing but results from global studies suggest that psilocybin can be an extremely effective treatment against major depressive disorder. "One of the reasons it's becoming incredibly popular... is that there are more people recovering from psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy than we've seen with any other new intervention in the last 20 years. There's a really high recovery rate of around 40-50%, which is unheard of with any other (treatments)."

TO UNDERSTAND THE experience from another perspective, I interviewed someone who has participated in multiple ayahuasca ceremonies. Rachel (whose name has been changed to protect her anonymity) is a successful Australian professional in her thirties, well-presented, with a manner that oscillates rapidly between pensive and ebullient. When the camera feed connects, she's sitting outside on a balcony in the Sydney sun, with a dog spread lazily on the floor behind her. She speaks animatedly about her experiences at an ayahuasca centre in Peru. "It's like spiritual open-heart surgery," she says half-smiling, half-terrified.

NIMEA KAYA Healing Center Lodge, Peru. Photograph by Olya Prokopets.

NICK BOYCE *is a New Zealand journalist currently based in New York City.*

At the centre Rachel visited, located in the lowland jungles of the Amazon, the guests participate in night-time ceremonies where they sit in a circle while local shamans sing “healing songs”, before they drink the ayahuasca tea–triggering the psychedelic experience. Rachel refers to it as “medicine” and gives it the pronoun “she”, as if the substance has a consciousness of its own. Some people believe the medicine speaks to you directly. “Sometimes she’ll keep repeating the message to you,” Rachel says. The medicine shows you what you need to improve your life and your relationships. Rachel looks serious, “the message is very clear... you know what you have to do, but whether you’re willing to do the work is a different story”. According to Rachel, the experience can be different every time you drink the tea, and it varies from person to person. Sometimes the ceremony might last for a few hours and sometimes it can go all night. Some people cry with abandon, others throw up, purging themselves physically and psychologically.

While Rachel's first few times were "mild and gentle", she describes her fourth experience as a "boom." With a slight giggle she explains, "It's like I got punched in the face and pinned down and couldn't move. It was just like I was obliterated." Given Rachel compares the experience to a psychological bashing, you might wonder why people would put themselves through it and whether it’s actually worth it. While Rachel clarifies that she’s not rushing back to do it again, she explains that her life “has changed like you would not believe as a result of having done it... home, work, relationships, family”. She gained insight into her relationship with her mother that allowed her to understand her in a way she never has before. It's hard to comprehend the effects without experiencing them firsthand, and possibly even harder to put into words–although many describe undergoing some kind of mystical experience. As Rachel put it: "All I can see is energy."

THERE ARE ALSO RULES WHICH REQUIRE THEM TO ABSTAIN FROM JUNK FOOD, PARTYING, AND SEX IN THE WEEKS BEFORE AND AFTER.

The centre Rachel attended is somewhere where “people in their early 20s to people in their 60s” come from all over the world to join. While it’s not a formal clinical environment, there are facilitators who are responsible for the guests’ safety. Everyone has to provide their medical background to check they’re suitable candidates. Shamans are also present and give the participants a “flower bath” and something to eat after the ceremony, which helps ease them back into reality. Group sessions are facilitated after the ceremonies to work through the experience as a collective. There are also rules which require participants to abstain from junk food, partying, and sex in the weeks before and after.

DR JEROME SARRIS, an expert on psychoactive plants who helped found the Psychae Institute.

The whole thing isn’t exactly cheap. Rachel paid $2,000, and some places charge up to $10,000. Ayahuasca retreats have popped up throughout the world and range from camping to luxury resorts. Costa Rica’s well-known Rythmia also offers a health club, gym, spa, massages, mud baths and a swimming pool. On top of the fees, you still need to factor in the cost of flights if you’re coming from abroad. This may not seem like an unreasonable amount for food, accommodation, and a potentially life-changing experience, but the price point puts it out of reach for most. On the other end of the spectrum, you can find people selling ayahuasca in bottles on the side of the road for those who want to risk taking it without any supervision or guidance.

Far from the Amazonian jungle and the streets of Costa Rica, people are using psychedelics at home, alone or with friends, to self-medicate. According to Dr Adam Winstock, a consultant psychiatrist who runs the Global Drug Survey (GDS), while there has been a slight dip in usage because of COVID-19, there has been a noticeable upward trend in psychedelic use globally over the past few years. Some people are even switching from their prescribed medications and turning to psychedelics instead. “There are huge risks with self-diagnosis,” Dr Winstock warns. “I worry about the most vulnerable in society either being exploited by dodgy people or taking treatment into their own hands.”

Microdosing, which involves taking such a small amount of a psychedelic substance that no hallucinogenic effects are felt, is a trend also seeing an increase in popularity. Anecdotally, people claim that microdosing increases creativity and general sense of wellbeing, but there aren’t sufficient scientific studies to support this. Dr Rossell pauses when questioned on this: “Lots of hearsay, not a

TOP TO BOTTOM: JILL LEVERS, JEROME SARRIS

lot of research." Because these substances are still illegal in most countries, microdosing occurs without direction from medical professionals. You can find guidelines for microdosing all over the internet, but these substances can have very individual effects, and what may be a microdose for one person may not be for another. Doctors warn that people sometimes mistakenly take more than a microdose, sending them into an unsettling and unexpected space between high and sober.

"WE LIKE VERY CLEAR DICHOTOMIES, GOOD DRUGS AND BAD DRUGS... AND IT'S NOT THAT SIMPLE." - DR ADAM WINSTOCK

For some people, these substances are so strongly associated with recreational drug use that they can't entertain the possibility of other applications. Dr Winstock explains how our understanding of substances can often be reductive: "We like very clear dichotomies, good drugs and bad drugs... and it's not that simple." Attitudes do appear to be changing albeit slowly; the Australian Government for one has been offering grants to fund research into psychedelics through the Medical Research Future Fund.

While things may look promising, we face years of research and trials before these treatments become widely accepted medical practice. Whether they will be accessible to everyone is yet to be seen. Weeks of intensive therapy requires a lot more resources than taking a pill, and a whole generation of medical professionals will need retraining. Dr Monica Barratt, a social scientist who has been working in drug policy for twenty years, highlights that "psychedelics tend to be used by people who have a bit more privilege in society", and that could be why they have less stigma than other illicit substances. Will psychedelic therapy become something reserved only for the wealthy? That depends on how governments and insurance companies around the world respond. Although, as several people interviewed for this article pointed out, the cost of six to ten weeks of intensive therapy is a lot less than the public health cost of treating someone with a lifetime of addiction or a debilitating mental health disorder.

For many of these substances, addiction is not an issue. They are self-limiting because you build a tolerance relatively quickly. Dr Winstock says that he has never seen anyone "seek treatment for MDMA or psychedelic dependence". Everyone interviewed agreed that more research is required, and the primary concern at this point is ensuring the safety of potential patients. In the meantime, perhaps we need to remain open to the idea that these substances are good for more than just getting high. As Dr Winstock explains, "The difference between what we call a drug and a medicine is down to who you get it from, and why you use it." Ⓡ

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BY **TYLER JENKE**

DANIEL JOHNS

THE DEFIANT ONE

As Daniel Johns releases his first solo album since 2017, he's clearing the air about his past and present, and plunging headfirst into his *FutureNever*.

—

Photography
SAM WONG *FOR ROLLING STONE*

SAM WONG FOR ROLLING STONE
OUTFIT: COMMON HOURS LUREX CAPE AND PANT
CHANEL RING & SUNGLASSES
VALENTINO BRACELET

"IN AUSTRALIA, I'M kind of famous, so I kind of expected something," Daniel Johns says with a sly smile. "I assumed something would happen, but I didn't expect the round of applause I got."

It was in the final months of 2021 that the world found itself engrossed in the latest Spotify original podcast, designed to answer its titular question, *Who is Daniel Johns?*. The multi-part production was an impressive undertaking, with host Kaitlyn Sawrey diving deep into the life of its namesake as he eschewed his usual apprehension toward media attention in an attempt to invite fans deeper into his world.

As with anything Johns touches, it was a riveting success, beating out the likes of Joe Rogan to become Australia's most popular podcast, with countless listeners globally receiving an unprecedented insight into one of the country's most beloved artists. But as the dust settled, one question remained: if this podcast told us all about Johns' past and present, what does the future hold?

IT'S A COOL day in Newcastle as Daniel Johns welcomes me into his coastal home; the same home he once referred to as a "'Seventies porn palace" out of *Boogie Nights*. A brewing rainstorm can be seen in the distance via an ocean view, while a friendly hug from a barefoot Johns accompanies the trip across the threshold and into a world that can only be described as an artist's paradise.

Guitars, vintage synths, old drums, and countless other pieces of gear sit to one side, while renovations see a number of paintings (Johns' lockdown-inspired foray into the medium) scattered against a wall. Just by the door sits a Yamaha grand piano, the same instrument on which Johns wrote the material for 2002's chart-topping album, *Diorama*.

On paper, the prospect of sitting down with Johns is an almost daunting task. After all, he's a 42-year-old with the legacy of an 80-year-old, he's sold more than ten million records worldwide for his work as a member of Silverchair, The Dissociatives, DREAMS, and as a solo musician, he's won more ARIA and APRA Awards than any other artist (21 and six, respectively), he's the only Australian to win both a Grammy and an Emmy in the same year, and his disdain for both interviews and being in the spotlight is well-documented. But as we sit down in Johns' living room, his dog Gia sitting casually alongside us, the perceived barrier crumbles. He asserts himself not as an icon of the music world, but rather, a vulnerable human being with an innate desire to create.

"Some people write records so they can perform it live, which is completely cool, but I don't write music so I can perform it," Johns explains, his sleeveless black top showing off his famous tattoos. "I write music because I'm trying to figure out ways to get the shapes in my head into a sonic form. I don't think I'll ever stop because I don't think I'll ever get what I want."

"I WRITE MUSIC BECAUSE I'M TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WAYS TO GET THE SHAPES IN MY HEAD INTO A SONIC FORM. I DON'T THINK I'LL EVER STOP BECAUSE I DON'T THINK I'LL EVER GET WHAT I WANT."

The podcast *Who is Daniel Johns?* arrived in October of 2021, more than six years after Johns had last released a solo album by way of his 2015 solo debut, *Talk*, and three years since the release of *No One Defeats Us*, the long-awaited debut from DREAMS, a collaboration with longtime friend and collaborator Luke Steele.

"I believe that the embryo of the podcast was me saying to the record company, 'There has to be a way to reach people with music where I don't have to perform on stage'," he recalls. "Because I really, really don't want to do that."

Immediately, the podcast became a massive hit, with fans the world over appreciating the invitation into Johns' rise to fame as the frontman for Silverchair while still a teenager, his vulnerability as he discussed his battles with both anorexia and reactive arthritis, and the bluntness with which he clarified that not only would his iconic band never reunite, but he would also likely never perform live again.

"I didn't really comprehend that, for lack of a better term—and I hate this term—my 'fanbase' was still there, that they're still hanging around," he explains. "I think that's the beauty of being in the game for almost 30 years; I think I've proven that I don't deliver shit."

Despite describing the podcast as a way to escape a need for more therapy, Johns explains he didn't expect anyone to care too deeply about it, but was honoured that listeners were eager to hear the truth after years of misinformation, which included a high-profile defamation suit against News Corp in 2019. That case resulted in Johns receiving a six-figure settlement after the publication of photos which falsely claimed to show Johns "swaggering out of [a] notorious Sydney brothel".

SAM WONG FOR ROLLING STONE
BALENCIAGA JUMPER AVAILABLE FROM DAVID JONES
TOM FORD PANTS AVAILABLE FROM MR. PORTER
CHANEL CHOKER
DIESEL NECKLACE AVAILABLE FROM YOOX

TYLER JENKE *has previously written cover stories for Rolling Stone on Sia and Chet Faker.*

“Some people are going to be perplexed because it’s not an experience of a record that I’ve ever done before. It’s more a collection of stuff that I’ve been doing while everyone thought I was dormant.”

retrospective
reviews

***DIORAMA* - 2002**

★★★☆☆

"Now in their early twenties, Johns and company have become genuine artists on their own terms." - **MARK KEMP**

SAM WONG FOR ROLLING STONE
OUTFIT: COMMON HOURS LUREX CAPE AND PANT
CHANEL RING & SUNGLASSES
VALENTINO BRACELET

SAM WONG FOR ROLLING STONE
OUTFIT: VALENTINO OUTFIT
CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN SHOES
DIESEL NECKLACE AVAILABLE FROM YOOX

retrospective

reviews

***FREAK SHOW* - 1997**

★★★½☆

"Silverchair have loads of potential."

- LORRAINE ALI

***FROGSTOMP* - 1995**

[NO RATING]

"When these guys turn 18, they'll really be dangerous."

- DAVID FRICKE

Using it as an opportunity to set the record straight on many questions that would frequently come his way, Johns admits it has the added benefit of helping listeners with their own struggles.

"There's a lot of people that have issues that they're embarrassed to talk about. It's not embarrassing to have been sick or fragile or to be sad," he notes, before his mischievous smile gives way to a sly quip. "No one's embarrassed about being happy, except for goths."

However, the biggest benefit of the podcast was the way it managed to serve as a bridge between the past and the future—a necessary step which allowed Johns to excise any mental confusion and forge ahead with pure clarity.

IT WAS IN early December that Johns announced the forthcoming arrival of *FutureNever*. Some snippets of his second solo record had been teased throughout the podcast, but it wasn't officially unveiled until Johns shared a personal letter to his fans.

"*FutureNever* is a place where your past, present, and future collide," he explained. "In the *FutureNever* the quantum of your past experiences become your superpower."

"I know I have a tendency to go missing but I'm back now," he concluded. "Follow me into *FutureNever*."

Preceded by no singles, the record was born out of Johns' desire to simply "fuck shit up" and to create things that are "real and resonant", though he admits that its almost "schizophrenic" nature will polarise some listeners.

"I'm sure I'm going to get slayed in the press, because it doesn't sound cohesive," he admits, casually brushing off memories of past criticisms. "But *I'm* not cohesive.

"Some people are going to be perplexed because it's not an experience of a record that I've ever done before. It's more a collection of stuff that I've been doing while everyone thought I was dormant."

Enthusiastically referring to it as the best record he's made to date (while freely admitting *any* artist would label their current work as such), *FutureNever* doesn't have origins in the conventional compositional sense of writing for the purpose of a new record. Rather, Johns explains it was the product of three entirely different albums colliding.

Never one to stop writing or composing (he admits to having thousands of demos around the place), three separate records (which will remain unheard) had managed to make themselves apparent over the years. One, dubbed "The Modern Punk Record", featured an electronic punk sound; another—"The Opera Record"—was self-explanatory; while "The Modern Electronica Record" featured the sort of futuristic R&B sound he had ventured into with 2015's *Talk*.

"I thought they were all separate records, so I was like, 'I don't know what the fuck to do'," he admits, "and I also had thousands and thousands of demos.

"So I actually called my label and just went, 'Once again I've bitten off more than I can chew. I don't know what the order is, I don't know what the fuck to do.' And it took ages to figure out that all of those sessions which I thought were different projects, were just me doing songwriting sessions. So I was actually doing the same record."

Though initially he'd toyed with the notion of releasing the three records under different names (to which he was told, "that is the dumbest idea you've ever had"), Johns began to realise he had effectively created the same record three times with different genres across eight years.

Intriguingly, the genre-hopping style of the record also influenced his synesthesia-a sensory phenomenon in which one sense often involuntarily stimulates another. While many artists see colours when they listen to music, Johns' new record reacts with his synesthesia to provoke chaotic images of gangster movies and the Forties.

"It's crazy how many different genres there are, but it sounds like the same record," he explains, perking up as he animatedly lists examples of famous albums that have done the same. "'Have you heard *Smile* by The Beach Boys? Have you heard *anything* that OutKast has done?' Most of my favourite records feel chaotic.

"I'll do like an old school Prince funk jam, then do something like it's from an opera, and something like it's from the *Tron* soundtrack if it's cool and it makes sense lyrically. Everything's supposed to sound like it's a collage rather than a painting. It's bits and pieces stuck on

"I THINK THAT'S THE BEAUTY OF BEING IN THE GAME FOR ALMOST 30 YEARS; I THINK I'VE PROVEN THAT I DON'T DELIVER SHIT."

SAM WONG FOR ROLLING STONE
OUTFIT: VALENTINO SHIRT, HERMES TROUSER

each other, and it's supposed to be a bit more dimensional."

FOR MANY OF those close to him, the creation of such a record would be of no surprise. Having long been described as a visionary, Johns' musical ideas began to flourish as he left his teen years. Following Silverchair's grunge-laden 1995 debut *Frogstomp* and 1997's *Freak Show*, Johns began to showcase his unique flavour and grandiose ideas on 1999's *Neon Ballroom*, an album that kicked off a run of what he labels "predominantly solo records with a great rhythm section".

Noting that every Silverchair album was set to be the last after *Neon Ballroom*, Johns explains he began to perceive resentment following the creation of this record. "It was always like, 'It's the three of us or it's not a thing'," he recalls, remembering a meeting with bandmates Ben Gillies and Chris Joannou which saw him request their presence as he followed his vision.

"It was like, 'I know this is going to be uncomfortable, but I'm going to pretty much make solo albums, and you're going to be the rhythm section. Otherwise I'll get another rhythm section'," he notes. "Obviously I would've preferred what [ended up happening], because they were really good, and we were all friends from childhood."

However, the decision to work on a record such as *Neon Ballroom*, that is, one with a far more resplendent vision than the likes of *Freak Show*, was difficult for Johns, given that he had previously tried to keep his head down while in high school for fear of his aspirations making him the target of bullying.

"High school was so traumatic for me," he recalls. "I wouldn't say I was visionless, but I didn't know what to do next, because if I did something too good, I was probably going to get beaten up. We were successful enough, I didn't want to do something amazing or else I'd get murdered.

"As soon as I left high school, that's when I moved into the house. I started writing *Neon Ballroom*, and then I was like, 'Okay, everything's changed now.'"

He pauses for a brief moment as he reflects on that time in his life, the air in the room changes and he wipes his eyes.

"WE WERE SUCCESSFUL ENOUGH, I DIDN'T WANT TO DO SOMETHING AMAZING OR ELSE I'D GET MURDERED."

IN 2002, SILVERCHAIR released *Diorama*, a record often considered to be their magnum opus. Working with composer Van Dyke Parks, and inspired by a sound more characteristic of the baroque pop genre, *Diorama* was a kaleidoscopic mix of sounds that went from the band's classic grunge to an orchestral power ballad in moments. Despite lacklustre critical reviews, the record would win five of the seven ARIA Awards it was nominated for, with the band's performance of "The Greatest View" at the ceremony considered a career highlight, especially given Johns' battle with reactive arthritis at the time.

Grammy Award-winning producer David Bottrill, who has worked alongside icons such as Peter Gabriel, King Crimson, Tool, and Muse—and co-produced *Diorama* alongside Johns—recalls the sort of vision the Silverchair frontman brought to the table.

"I think he's one of the rare talents of musical compositional ability in that he's almost too clever and almost too talented in a way," Bottrill explains. "I think he has a hard time tempering what he does for commercial appeal. Because I think he's so uniquely talented as a writer and as an artist."

One of the record's standout moments, the five-and-a-half minute "Tuna in The Brine", is remembered by Bottrill as an example of Johns' legendary creativity thanks to its sweeping orchestral arrangements, complex chord structures, and soaring, almost operatic vocals.

"He'd never played piano before," he begins, "But he got this piano, learned how to play it and wrote 'Tuna in The Brine'. It's an extraordinarily complex composition. I mean, nobody does that. When you're a kid, you pick up a guitar and you write C, D, G songs—you don't write 'Tuna'."

Recalling the time spent working alongside Johns and his Silverchair bandmates while recording *Diorama*, Bottrill explains that Johns stands tall as a unique talent whose desire to create is only handicapped by the general public's ability to understand it.

"[If] you keep driving forward and compositionally writing things that you want to develop into something special, unique, and emotional [...] then you end up with somebody like Daniel who creates these amazing things," Bottrill notes. "And sometimes—for lack of a better description—goes above or beyond what people can comprehend."

Though he admits his only failing on the record was his inability to help Johns "dumb it down" for the masses, he concedes that some of the greatest songs in rock music were often far from the traditional compositional structure, yet received widespread praise years down the line.

"[Queen's] 'Bohemian Rhapsody' is a classic example of that," he points out. "Who would say that was a structure that was pop standard format? And yet, [it was] hugely successful. To this day, it's one of the most classic rock and pop songs ever.

"The world was open for this kind of experimentation in pop or rock music. So I was excited to explore these new, or even old dimensions, but bring them into a new era."

ONE NOTABLE FAN of Silverchair and the wider catalogue of Johns' is Ryan Tedder, a prolific songwriter, three-time Grammy Award winner, and the lead vocalist of chart-topping pop/rock outfit OneRepublic. Just two months younger than Johns, Tedder explains he found himself looking to the Aussie musician as an example of what a potential career could be.

"It was like [Silverchair were] teenage superheroes because nobody, no 15-year-old that I was friends with, had even a snowball's chance in hell of getting a record deal, much less writing a decent song," he remembers.

"I had just started writing songs at 15. So for me, I was probably the biggest Silverchair fan in the state of Oklahoma. And then I ended up following them all the way through."

As Tedder recalls, the careers of both Silverchair and OneRepublic were akin to passing ships in the night, with *Young Modern* arriving just months before OneRepublic's debut album, *Dreaming Out Loud*, was released into the world. Despite this, he remembers the record and its lead single, "Straight Lines", having a profound impact on the music his band would make.

"I remember doing promo in America in 2007 and 2008, when they were promoting [the single] and I was telling radio programmers in America, 'Guys, you're sleeping on the Silverchair single," he recalls. "'You got to be playing "Straight Lines". This song is an absolute banger'.

"I remember that we were all so obsessed with that record. We actually have probably tried to copy it a few times with OneRepublic."

But despite Silverchair's lack of success in the US, Tedder claims it was in fact Johns' musical versatility, and his lack of desire to pander to audiences by repeating the same trick over and over again that contributed to his overall success as an artist. While Tedder notes that Americans are notoriously the "most fickle audience in the world", Johns' refusal to "play the game" set up by major record labels, and to instead stay true to his own creative visions, is a testament to his status as an artist.

"Doing [*The Dissociatives* and *Young Modern*] back to back really shows the breadth and depth of what that guy's capable of, which is just crazy," he explains. "And then he did the solo [material], which is more R&B and urban. I think the guy can do whatever genre he wants to.

"More than anything, it's really hard when you don't have parameters. When you're capable of actually genre-hopping or shape-shifting into so many genres, that is the hardest. Believe it or not, options can spell disaster, and I often end up jealous of artists who can only sing one way, really only play one instrument, and are only interested in one genre. That's kind of a blessing, because if you're a guy like Daniel, you're just going, 'Well, my option is everything'. And that'll drive a person crazy."

IN THE YEARS following Diorama, Johns again showcased his appetite for a grander vision. While 2004 brought with it the self-titled album from The Dissociatives–a collaboration with longtime friend Paul Mac–2007 saw the release of Silverchair's Young Modern, their final record before their 2011 split. While 2015 featured the release of Talk, 2018 saw Johns and Luke Steele release DREAMS' first album, a record that arrived after the duo had made their live debut at Coachella–the first band to perform at the iconic Californian festival before releasing any music.

"I love that record," Johns says of DREAMS' debut. "I think that's–in my entire career–the least successful and most proud I'd been of a record until now. I'm proud of all my records, but just in terms of the amount of effort, the amount of vision that went into it, and the risks that we took. I was so proud of it."

However, it was his solo debut, Talk, that achieved the most attention upon its release. Ending a lengthy drought of records from Johns, it was–like every record he had released previously–designed as the next step in a continual musical evolution, and most importantly, a reaction to everything that had come before.

"It's about deleting yourself and starting again," Johns told triple j's Richard Kingsmill at the time. In hindsight though, he argues that summation was more pertinent for FutureNever than Talk.

"Talk was pressing restart; like starting a new career," he explains. "And it was very much on purpose so I didn't sound like a rock'n'roll band.

"FutureNever is a lot different because I'm embracing the past, I'm embracing the present, and I'm looking forward to the future. Whereas Talk was more like a desperate attempt to get to the future; leap-frogging everything that's happened."

Such a decision to rapidly race to the future was understandable. After all, with countless fans ignoring the prospect of a burgeoning solo career to instead plead for the return of Silverchair (whose final three records Johns looks at as solo releases anyway), it makes sense that there would be a mad dash to move ahead and break new ground.

"*Talk* was a protest against everyone that wanted me to keep doing Silverchair, despite the fact that Silverchair was always different," he explains. "I was really worried about if I had a future outside of the brand and the band Silverchair. *FutureNever* is way more emotionally evolved.

"It's not just about avoiding what happened in the past. *FutureNever* includes everything," he adds. "The record is a celebration of self-acceptance, whereas *Talk* was an avoidance of myself."

INDEED, *FUTURENEVER* IS an album unlike anything Daniel Johns' fans have ever heard before. Those seeking something of a Silverchair throwback are advised to look elsewhere, but for anyone hoping to find Johns at his creative peak, it's manna from heaven.

Due to its somewhat unexpected composition as the best tracks from three separate records, it shows an unfiltered artist at his best, and one creating work far from the idea of monetisation and commercialism.

"We started working on a record here [during lockdown in 2020] and I deliberately said, 'This is not for public consumption; this is just for a visceral experience'," he recalls. "I really just wanted to sit and fuck with gear and just be crazy and make shit–no one needed to hear it. But as usual everyone goes, 'That should be the first single'."

Frustrated by the way everything turns into a corporate exercise when you're a signed artist, Johns turned his attention to painting–for the first time since high school–as a way to escape the idea of selling a product, even though demand for his paintings have begun to grow. Given the current mid-pandemic climate for artists, Johns is in an enviable position. He says he's not in it for the financial side of things, admitting he's happy with the position that he finds himself in, and that if "everything went to shit right now", he wouldn't care.

"I don't think people realise how much I don't give a fuck about that bit," he explains. "It's the only reason that the *FutureNever* is so important to me, because I'm actually so proud of it and I want people to hear it. I really genuinely do."

It's easy to see why. Despite its varied sounds, it feels indelibly stamped with Johns' classic influence. A natural evolution from his last body of work, it effortlessly moves between the woozy pop of songs such as "Mansions", the operatic grandeur of "Reclaim" (which shows a side of his work that we've not yet seen), and "Electric", which feels like the closest Johns has ever come to making a 'pop' record. In the case of the latter, it also sees Johns working with the extremely talented vocalist Moxie Raia who, by design, remained a complete unknown to him at first.

"I've never met her," he admits. "We had the song and our producer was working on the demo, and he sent it back with this funk jam in the middle with this girl. I've still never met her, I don't even know her name, but I was like, 'This chick is fire'. She sounds like a star.

"I kind of loved that I heard it back and I deliberately have never tried to figure out who it is, because even to me that's mysterious. This random goddess comes into the song."

Though they've since formally connected, that's not the only collaboration featured on the record, with names such as What So Not, Van Dyke Parks, and Tame Impala's Kevin Parker making appearances, while the Smashing Pumpkins' Billy Corgan and Jimmy Chamberlin both appear on one song.

Meanwhile, the record also boasts some callbacks to Johns' past, by way of the purplegirl-featuring "FreakNever", which revisits his 1997 single, "Freak", through a modernised yet childlike lens, or "Those Thieving Birds Part 3", which completes a trilogy first explored on 2007's *Young Modern*. However, one of the record's biggest moments comes by way of "Cocaine Killer", a song created with Peking Duk, hours after they'd abandoned what Johns believes could've been a huge single.

"I wrote that song right here with Peking Duk, ages ago," he recalls. "I'm gonna say 2017 or 2018, maybe even earlier. They're writing all these party bangers, and they played me that beat and I was like, 'I want to do something on that'.

"Ironically it was the morning after we wrote a song that we thought was going to be a massive Peking Duk hit, and I was like, 'Nah'. We did it in about three hours and then obviously we worked on it for ages."

While *FutureNever* undoubtedly creates new opportunities, they won't be explored in a live setting. Johns explains he no longer has a desire to perform live.

"I'm 95% sure that it's never again," he explains. "I never said 'No, never again', because it's not healthy; you've said it and now you can't. It's like putting yourself in jail. But I have

STYLIST: **Jana Bartolo**
@janabartolo
OUTFIT: *Common Hours lurex cape, Chanel ring, Valentino bracelet*

GROOMING: **Gavin Anesbury**
@gavinanesburybeauty

PRODUCTION: **Long Story Short**
@longstoryshortagency

PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT:
Steven.K.W.Chan

STYLING ASSISTANT:
Kirsten Humphreys

GROOMING ASSISTANT:
Lucy Jackson

absolutely no fucking way to think in my head that that's something I would want to do.

"I didn't enjoy it since I was like 17. At the start, when I was like 13 to about [1997], I loved it. I just loved it because you just want to play and put pedals on. From about the second album, I've never wanted to be onstage. I'll do it, for example, when Van Dyke Parks calls me and asks if you want to learn 30 American classics and play at the Adelaide Festival, I'm like, 'it's Van Dyke Parks, okay'. But I don't need that validation."

In the *Who is Daniel Johns?* podcast, Johns explained his mental health plays a role in his decision not to play live, with a mental cloudiness and stage fright working against him in addition to regular anxieties that go along with any performance. Stage fright might not be an uncommon experience, with a 2016 survey finding that about 75% of artists admitted to performance-related anxiety, but for Johns, it's a debilitating condition that hampers his ability to perform to the level he strives for.

But in addition to that, he also notes that for any artist that experiments sonically, the live experience usually ends up somewhat more disappointing than the record.

"THE FUTURE IS FREEDOM. THAT'S HOW I THINK ABOUT IT."

Though Johns *has* performed live in recent years–including the aforementioned Van Dyke Parks performance, two Opera House shows supporting *Talk*, performing with DREAMS at Coachella, and appearing alongside close friend What So Not in 2019 for a rendition of "Freak" at Splendour in The Grass–he explains that the only time he would perform again would be to aid a friend, before upping his level of certainty to 99.9%.

"I just don't feel like a performing artist. I don't feel like a touring artist," he explains. "I feel like someone who needs to come up with stuff, and come up with new shit.

"The performance is fine; I'm totally cool to perform. It's the bit leading up to it. It drives me mental. It drives me crazy, I get so anxious. If someone said to me–like they did with the Van Dyke Park Adelaide performance–'Okay, in three months, you're going to do this thing'. I was like, 'Okay, cool that seems far enough away'. From that night on, I couldn't sleep. Three months of thinking about, and it drives me fucking crazy."

HOWEVER, IN THE absence of live performances to help promote the record, Johns is aiming to complement the release with a future film component that will help contextualise the album, and also put the focus on his past.

Though he admits that the journey to where he is today was one that was littered with difficult obstacles, he explains that *FutureNever* also exists to contextualise his own early days within the industry, while creating something of a cautionary dialogue for those who find themselves following in his own path.

"I think that the emotional dialogue is, 'Be careful, you don't know what you're getting yourself into. If you want to do it, do it'," he explains, admitting he did have that same counsel from those in Silverchair's inner circle, but was unable to appreciate the gravity of what was coming. "Now–I think this is the point of the *FutureNever*–I go, 'Okay, maybe just leave it for a bit. You might miss your boat, but you also might have a more balanced, more comfortable life.' It's a total catch-22; it's throwing the dice.

"Personally, if I was honest, I would say, 'Don't do it'," he admits. "But it's too late, so you've just gotta make art out of it."

SITTING IN HIS Newcastle home, it feels as though we've come full circle. Johns is no longer running from or reacting to his past, and he feels at peace with the present while looking into the *FutureNever*. But the question remains: What *does* the future look like for Daniel Johns?

"That's a good fucking question." He looks to his right, staring through his stereo setup and casually-placed musical equipment as he pauses for a few moments to think. "The future is freedom. That's how I think about it." ®

SAM WONG FOR ROLLING STONE
OUTFIT: NONPLUS SUIT, CHANEL ACCESSORIES

Luke Steele: A Maverick Mind

From Empire of The Sun overlord to eccentric lone ranger, Luke Steele's debut solo record proves sometimes you don't get answers, you get questions.

BY POPPY REID

Photography by

JODI STEELE

AFTER 25 YEARS as one of the globe's most renowned artists, Luke Steele is starting again. He's ditched the avant-garde costumery and the stage makeup characteristic of Empire of The Sun, and gone solo.

With a quarter century run-up, you might think his solo endeavour would be overcooked in parts. It's true that *Listen to The Water* is 25 years in the making, but it's far from overdone. With this record, Steele made a point to cast aside any of the cryptic references he first learned from growing up in Perth's indie scene and instead has opted to write music in which he lays himself bare.

"I think I've had to go through what I've gone through, which has just been so much in the last 25 years, to write an honest song. I feel like I've finally reached that point," he says. "[...] It's like the makeup's off, everything's off, and I'm talking about things that are on my heart."

Luke Steele is speaking to *Rolling Stone* from the home studio at his ranch in Northern California, up near the active volcano Mount Shasta. There's a glowing pink neon sign behind him, depicting the name he gave his new home: Luke Steele's Eccentric Farm. Steele moved to the ranch with his wife and two children after ten years living in Santa Monica; and while it's a far cry from Silicon Beach, it suits him. Amid the pandemic, the Steeles haven't left their sanctuary in the Californian wilderness. They're now used to the bears, snakes, and scorpions, and have used the isolation as an opportunity to create art together as a family. "My wife's the director and then the kids are kind of, you know, the actors," he says of the videos they've been making lately.

POPPY REID *wrote the Keith Urban cover story in the Sept-Nov 2021 magazine.*

If people are a product of their surroundings, Luke Steele is El Dorado, a promised land discovered after two decades of soul-searching. *Listen to The Water* is a lesson in how Steele sees the world. His lyrical observations are on point for a man of his status, and the spontaneity in his music keeps fans guessing as he draws them into new territory. "It's been great to kind of let go of the reins of the horses and just understand that sometimes the magic is in the discovery," he notes. "If you know what it's going to be at the end goal, it's probably going to be boring."

Sitting in his neon-lit studio, Luke Steele has the face of someone destined for stardom. It was never the makeup and costumes that made him a public figure–although he's wearing a hint of eyeliner today. Steele's aesthetic has always been deep and interesting but lightly etched with a magnetic sadness. In Steele's world though, sorrow is an opportunity for growth.

"I struggle a lot with the power of the mind," he acknowledges. "It's kind of like the strength of the pendulum. When it's up, it's like they say, 'nothing is as powerful as a transformed mind'. I'm like the best in the world. But then when it swings the other way, it's the things that can get conflicted in your mind, they can just send you to the dark depths of nowhere land."

Steele talks deliberately when he recalls the time his wife Jodi (or Snaps, as he calls her) was pregnant and he told her his vision of their future together. The vision, which included a house by the ocean, a house in Los Angeles, travelling the world together and him selling out the Hollywood Bowl, was uncannily prescient.

"My parents-in-law just looked at me like, 'You're a nutcase'," he laughs. "And even my parents, you know. But we did all that. We sold out the Hollywood Bowl. We lived by the ocean, we travelled the world..." Steele's face changes, he stops smiling. "But then when I fall, my mind's so powerful that I believe with conviction of the dark side. I get caught in these patterns and I can't get out. And it takes eight to ten months of meditation and realising this is a lie that's been played out. Like the devil's just been playing this on repeat, until now he's captured your mind. So I always talk a lot about that; you know, there is nothing as powerful as a changed mind."

Steele's iterations over the years, both musically and personally, were just the pieces needed for this final mosaic. Whether it was his formative years in alt-rock band The Sleepy Jackson, where he learned to navigate the music industry, or his globetrotting, chart-climbing double act with Nick Littlemore in Empire of The Sun–a project which holds strong and is one of Australia's most commercially successful exports–Steele is a product of a life in the limelight, but he has retained artistic integrity despite it. Steele isn't the fair-weather type when it comes to his collaborations either. His projects, both old and new, largely remain active. The two aforementioned projects formed golden stepping stones to co-writes with acts like Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and Yoko Ono, and led to ventures like his electro-pop project H3000 with producer-artist Jarrad Rogers, and DREAMS, his technocrat alliance with Daniel Johns.

"Daniel Johns would always say to me, 'Be a rock star while you can'. And I would always say, 'Yeah, yeah...' but I never really understood what he meant till now. You have to go full octane," he adds, perhaps remembering the 'one to three smashed guitars' quota at every Empire of The Sun show. "And then there is a point where that effervescence fades. And the tapestry changes and you see it through a different lens. And not saying I'm like 430 years old, but you have a different energy and vision for it all."

One of the turning points on *Listen to The Water* arrived a couple of years ago when Steele performed an industry showcase to the gatekeepers of the music industry. He tells me he performed four records worth of songs and after this 45-song marathon, he felt it had no impact.

"I pine for the power of influence," he professes. "It felt like data and algorithms had taken over industry ears and no one had emotional responses to music or melody anymore.

"[...] I sort of realised, well, you know, 'has the door closed on my power of influence?' Has that effervescence of the years gone? Like *Toy Story*, you throw it out."

Following that industry showcase, Steele decided to get real and raw with his fans, penning what is now track six on the album. "Gladiator" is a swirling insight into Steele's heart, where realism and blunt candour mingle with graceful pedal steel guitar from the exalted Dan Dugmore (James Taylor, Lionel Richie, Stevie Nicks).

"No one wants ruins, everyone
wants the gladiator
No one really needs words, they
just want the action."

NEVER ONE TO shy away from opinion or conviction, Steele's move to America 12 years ago saw him censor himself politically during Donald Trump's controversial reign as President. "I said some stuff about that, about the last guy that was running this country, and people were like, 'I'm going to come around and kill you'."

Nowadays, that censorship is limited (kind of) to social media. Steele is more like Bob Dylan in the way he proffers his political views: it's all in the music.

"I don't know how these people have the energy [to send death threats]," he shakes his head. "Since when did the soccer mums and the truck drivers, and even journalists, have the energy to get a PhD in science?," he stops himself. "I promised myself I wasn't going to say that."

In reality, Luke Steele is less eager to impress than to be understood. As Empire of The Sun wrapped up recording sessions for their fourth album in 2019 with producer Jacknife Lee up in Topanga Canyon, both members began to look inward. Nick Littlemore went on a retreat to clear his head and Steele felt his solo record calling.

"It sort of began around that," says Steele, referring to the end of his eight months in Topanga Canyon. "After working on Empire, which is so dimensional and has so many moving parts, I needed to counteract with something completely opposite, just me and a guitar.

"I think sometimes it's like it can become so big. It turns into a mansion, you know, a castle; you're building a hotel every record and it's just yeah..." his voice grows faint. "You just kind

“It's like the makeup's off, everything's off and I'm talking about things that are on my heart.”

JODI STEELE

of want to go to the island and go fishing or something."

On the title track which kicks off his new record, Steele shares his angst about the modern world with the listener. Written around the same time he and Littlemore were making an Empire of The Sun album in October of 2019, "Listen to The Water" rebels against Steele's previous work. Through wallowing synths and tingling guitar lines, Steele's wistful words give us questions rather than answers (*"Why does the radio sound like plastic? / Why are the people so aggressive?"*). But that's exactly the point.

"[Empire of The Sun had] been to Japan a couple of times and it was becoming this conceptual, like, *Japanese* thing. It was quite heavy, and then one day I said I just need to start with *this* you know. I need to start this new chapter." You can hear the edge of excitement in his voice. "It was like that *Jerry Maguire* moment. Like, I have to go, 'Who's with me?!'

"And it just started. 'Listen to The Water. Listen to God, listen to my daughter', you know. Why *does* the radio sound like this? I still get confused about that. Why is someone singing about shaking this or shaking that? How has that changed since John Lennon? How did we end up here? Why do you get depressed? Why does the clock stop? And it was just all these things that I started throwing out. It wasn't so much a story. I think it was more like the miracles with the madness and the questions and the answers."

BEING LUKE STEELE means having access to world class players, a handy advantage when it comes to a long-awaited debut album. He's the artist who co-produced Beyoncé's "Rather Die Young" single in 2010, who incited Jay-Z to pull over in his SUV in Times Square when he spotted him, to wind down his window and open the conversation with one drawn out word: "Steeeele". However, being Luke Steele, the new solo-album-making Luke Steele, means keeping his collaborators to a minimum. *Listen to The Water* features just two other musicians: lauded Nashville-based pedal steel player Dan Dugmore (who worked as a member of Linda Ronstadt's Band for 14 years) and LA-based percussionist Brian Kilgore, whose credits are as varied as they are impressive, from Aretha Franklin to Daft Punk.

"When I was down there [in Nashville] you'd say, 'I'm working with Dan Dugmore' and people would stop, put their drink down," Steele grins.

The veterans of their craft collaborated with Steele both in person pre-COVID and via Zoom after the pandemic hit in early 2020. Both helped Steele strip back his sound. You won't find any complex vocal layering, no meticulously built distortion, zero auto-tune. It's raw Steele, volunteering his most powerful instrument, his own voice.

"Not to downplay what I've done before but it can kind of become you know," he pauses, "I became so porcelain and hi-fi. Like this shiny figure kind of thing. Where I'm really quite a mess."

"[Working with Dugmore and Kilgore] cooled the palate," he says. "I think sometimes I'm like a chef of sounds and just trying to find those ingredients that work with my voice. But luckily I found them, you wouldn't want to be waiting too long for that meal."

"It was like that *Jerry Maguire* moment. Like 'I have to go, 'Who's with me?!'"

Steele mines his own life for material on *Listen to The Water*, digging into the deep cuts and shallow bruises of his past ("Bullet Train", "Get Out Now") as well as the moments of pure sunshine and gratitude ("Pool of Love", "Two of Us"). The entirely instrumental track "Bullet Train" was written the morning after Pete Lusty, Steele's former manager of 15 years, lost his battle with cancer.

"He was a really classy guy," Steele says fondly. "He had a James Bond boat with the wooden panels [...]. When he got married his suit was custom made in Savile Row.

"We had a lot of good times together, we travelled the whole world and he was instrumental in changing not only my life and my music, but my family's life forever. And I just imagine him on this train, this really classy bullet train. Just ascending to heaven. I just did that piano piece in two hours."

Sparse, warm, inviting, and under two minutes long, Steele never entertained the idea of adding lyrics. "You know that instinct in your heart when you know something is finished," he says.

Conversely, the song "My Boy", written about his son Cruise, owes its power to the lyrics.

"My boy, please stop crying
'Cause when I go you will see clearly
All the things your father taught
In a world that's lost itself
So please, please stop crying tonight"

JODI STEELE

“I became so porcelain and hi-fi. Like this shiny figure kind of thing. Where I'm really quite a mess.”

Steele was on a post-show flight from Miami in 2018 when he found the song about his son’s infant years in his voice memos. “It's funny with that song because my memory is pretty good,” he says. “I have a memory like an elephant, but with that song I can't remember ever writing it. [...] It's an amazing thing with songs, sometimes they disappear and then they turn up at the strangest time in your life.”

It may have taken Luke Steele 25 years “to write an honest song” and release a solo album, but it has never been the finish line that interests him. Steele is far more at peace asking questions than preaching certainties. He collects his observations of the world like talismans, drawing from his experiences to imagine a new reality which he reflects in his music.

“I'm still as confused as ever,” he smiles. “And that's why it was great to do the record. It's been great for me to start this chapter because I think I've got about six million songs to write.” ®

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SPEED: THIS IS SYDNEY HARD-CORE

By Geordie Gray

PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK RUDDER

“This is Sydney fucking hardcore. Respect each other. Respect this venue. And mosh hard as fuck. It’s a gang called SPEED, baby.”

IT SEEMS ENTIRELY appropriate that SPEED's *2020 Flex* release show fell on the day Sydney's newly-announced masked mandates would come into place. Sardined into the ground floor of Sydney's Burdekin Hotel in late June, apocalypse was in the air. Days later, we'd find ourselves in our most exhaustive lockdown yet.

Amid the unspoken acceptance that this was our last chance to see our friends, let alone watch live music, something special and cosmic happened. The energy was high-octane, inhibitions were shed, bodies flew akimbo. What prevailed was not nihilism, but an overwhelming sense of community; a return to subculture.

SPEED are a five-piece hardcore band hailing from all corners of Sydney, from the North Shore to Penrith. They are Jem Siow, Aaron Siow, Joshua Clayton, Denis Vichidsvongsa, and Kane Vardon.

I spoke with Jem, Aaron, and Josh at Aaron's sharehouse in Newtown. The housemates are cultivating a vegetable garden in the backyard; tomatoes, passionfruit, an impressive climbing fig. There's a painting by Shaun Daniel Allen (who fronts the Yugambeh/Bundjalung hardcore outfit Nerve Damage) hanging in the living room. It's houseproud and welcoming.

Save Aaron, all members of SPEED are stalwarts of the Australian music scene, cutting their teeth in bands like Endless Heights, Legions, Relentless, Mood Swing, and Wreath.

These bands are lifelong projects. Through them, they've experienced the sought-after rites of being a musician: touring internationally, performing in front of thousands on festival main stages, releasing albums through major labels. SPEED as an entity is a different beast; a return to roots, a championing of culture.

From the outset it is clear that SPEED does not exist for the sake of just being a band. Their purpose is startling in its lucidity: they want to keep the hardcore scene that shaped them alive, and ensure the baton gets passed to the next generation.

"The first mission was to be a band that were serious about hardcore, and to put it on people's radar again," says Jem. "We wanted people who have either fallen out of it, or who have been waiting for it, or who have no idea about it, to realise that this is something that's sick."

Ten years ago hardcore was a dominating force in Sydney. Festivals would pull crowds of thousands; local shows hundreds. There were scenes within scenes, throngs of bands representing their LGAs, congregating at local PCYCs. "You had Western Sydney, you had Eastern Suburbs, you had South Sydney, South West Sydney, the Northern Beaches scene, the Northern Scene, the Hills area," Jem rapid-fires.

It was also a confluence of subcultures. "You would go to a hardcore show back then and it would just be like a bunch of fucking bleached blonde hair, surfer kids from the south coast or something, there'd be a bunch of skaters and shit. It was so much," says Josh.

In recent years, hardcore in Australia has dwindled. The root of its decline is muddied. In America it's prosperous, profitable, and capable of transcending the underground (one need only look at Turnstile's December appearance on *Late Night With Seth Meyers*). Theories are thrown around the ring as to what led to its demise: the death of guitar music, the closure of live music venues across Sydney, or, as Jem muses, "our perception of our peers is that it's become uncool".

In the buoyant years of Australian hardcore, punk was ingrained in the Australian psyche, a force on triple j. It's no longer the dominant cultural mode. "A lot of the bridges into hardcore at that time don't really exist anymore," says Josh. "There hasn't been anything to really draw people to it, the way that it used to."

The hardcore drought saw the decline of scenes that flew the flag for their area, and reduced it to a sole, waning scene for each city. "We'd be lucky if there were 50 people at a show," says Jem of its bleakest years. "That was the standard, it was dismal."

After years spent waiting for the return of hardcore, they realised they would have to act on intuition and do it for themselves. So they set out to reignite the spark, to put Australia back on the map again: "We want to give Australia a band to ride for."

SPEED SPEAK WITH humility. They are cautious about positioning themselves as flag-bearers of the culture. Everything they do comes from an urgent desire to boost hardcore. They have the foresight to recognise that in order for a music scene to flourish, there must be bands to root for.

"You have to have bands," says Jem. "You cannot have a scene without it. Everyone can contribute, but you have to have bands. This was the most significant way we thought we could start to get things rolling and hopefully inspire people to start more bands. That's been the mission since day one."

Jem and Josh are orators of hardcore, eager to share their hard-earned wisdom. Over the first lockdown they started the podcast *Forge Ahead*. A show dedicated to the past, present, and future of hardcore in Australia. They sensed that Australian hardcore was experiencing an upswing, and wanted to harness that momentum whilst the world stopped.

"I think SPEED is demonstrating what we think the ideal hardcore scene should look like. And *Forge Ahead* is us trying to articulate it," says Josh. "It's our opportunity to present what we think hardcore should be. To push it in the right direction."

SPEED have wrestled with the history of hardcore, and acknowledge that the genre's past incarnations lacked inclusivity and diversity. Hardcore, the Adam's rib from punk, was, after all, a reactionary movement born out of predominately white, working-class, male frustrations. They are considering the past, its values, its convictions—and steering the future.

Three members of the SPEED fold are of South East Asian descent, and representation is at the forefront of their ethos. When releasing their first EP, *DEMO 19,* the band made the considered choice to use a portrait as cover art. "I wanted people to know this is what we look like."

"There was a conscious decision for me to represent myself in the way that I wanted to be seen," says Jem, who is first-generation Chinese-Australian. "There are no hardcore bands that fit the package of who I see myself as. This journey for representation that reflects who you are is something that a lot of people seem to have been empowered by in discovering SPEED.

"There is an intrinsic struggle for people of colour or first generation Australians to find representation for yourself. My whole life I have thought of myself as Australian and Asian and I've never seen myself represented the way I wanted to be represented," he continues.

Jem notes that he, Aaron, and Denis have been brought up differently to many first generation Asian Australians, a liberty that led them to hardcore. "We're very westernised and we've been brought up with very open minds, in terms of our

"It was the fucking most psycho thing that ever happened in my life. I literally couldn't sleep for three days."

TAHMIN NURULLAH

SPEED MEMBERS

L-R: *Jem Siow, Aaron Siow, Joshua Clayton, Kane Vardon, and Denis Vichidsvongsa.*

careers and what we want to do in life," he says. "You don't really see many Asians in hardcore."

He recalls his experience being an Asian person in hardcore. That he and his friend, B-Chan, were "pretty much" the only two Asian people in the scene, and would often get mixed up. "There's just not many Asian people and you know, I completely understand that coming from where I grew up. It's such an intimidating environment. It's predominantly white."

HARDCORE CAN BE intimidating, and SPEED are extending their hand to those that may not feel welcome.

"It's been very important that we put that identity into the band because I see the effect it has on a lot of people, a lot of Asians," says Jem. "People seem to be excited about this, and I guess that's because they can see something that's relatable. They can see something that's tangible. They can see something of themselves in it."

"This band is a gift to us in the sense that it has a purpose. People are getting something from it, a sense of empowerment."

In June 2021, the band dropped a trailer for their "WE SEE U" video on Twitter. The response was batshit. Hundreds of retweets, likes in the thousands. Comments that spoke to the audience's genuine sense of representation: "The Laos shirt sold me"; "Hmong dudes getting down on some hardcore? I'm in brothers." It struck a chord.

"It was the fucking most psycho thing that ever happened in my life," says an exuberant Jem. "I literally couldn't sleep for three days."

"Two weeks of wanting to throw your phone out the window, fucking ridiculous," adds Josh.

The success of "WE SEE U" caught the eye of the industry at large. SPEED were approached by international labels, producers, industry professionals, clothing companies, and businesses, all looking to capitalise.

Though humbled, SPEED declined. To accept would go against the implicit and explicit values of the band and hardcore at large. They speak at lengths of the importance of being attuned to authenticity and hold themselves accountable for armouring the culture against contaminating influences.

"As things break out, you're going to get more industry heads attempting to dilute what we're trying to do," says Jem. "That's why it's so important that these values are so consciously pushed, so that it never gets fumbled with."

"Authenticity was very important to us, to hardcore especially. It doesn't have labels that just build an act, and manufacture them like an industry prop. If you are fake in hardcore, you will be sniffed out straight away," he continues. "It's just the way it is."

GEORDIE GRAY *is a Journalist and a Digital Producer for* The Australian.

TAHMIN NURULLAH

"I think SPEED revealed that so little of hardcore is actually about the music."

SPEED are signed with Last Ride Records, a label run by Tom Maddocks from his bedroom in Newcastle. At the vanguard of Australian hardcore, it's released projects from the likes of Primitive Blast, Histamine, Ill Natured, The Others, and Nerve Damage.

There was never a contract signed between the band and label. "That's the way it should be," they explain, "No contracts in hardcore." It's a pact built on good faith.

"All of the people that we work with have the exact same attitude as us, they have the same goal as us. We can trust them to do whatever they need to do because we know that they fully understand where we're coming from, and so they're never ever going to fumble it," says Josh.

The culture of hardcore is not limited to music, it spawns art in all forms. There are visual artists, photographers, producers, academics, all with roots in the scene. Aaron (who is Jem's younger brother), had never played music before joining SPEED. His youth was entrenched in hip-hop and dance.

Aaron was introduced to hardcore by proximity to Jem. Through witnessing the culture, and the DIY ethos of the scene, he was inspired to undertake his own creative pursuits, which manifested in the launch of his clothing label, SAATO.

"Through hardcore I learnt to drive things myself. Coming more into myself and letting hardcore influence things. Do it yourself, get shit done. Find out what you want to do and push it," says Aaron.

"I think SPEED revealed that so little of hardcore is actually about the music," says Josh. "It doesn't exist without an audience."

"It's so based around the spectacle of actively attending shows, that's participation as well. Whether you're a photographer at a show, or a punter taking shots in the pit—it's all part of participation within. It builds its own community."

Though for those wanting to play in bands, the beauty of hardcore is in its accessibilty, its commitment to DIY. "It's the simplest music to make. It's the dumbest music to make." says Jem. "If you don't get it or you're not an avid listener, you hear it and you're like 'this is fucking caveman music! This is the most primitive stupid shit ever!'. But that is essentially the accessibility of it, anyone can play it."

At the crux of everything is community. "It's friends, it's my brother. I would never work with anybody in a band like this that wasn't like family to me," says Jem.

"That is such an important thing, because the experience of SPEED is about creating that bond with people and deepening that through the music."

"This is a culture that we love and we want to pay respect to it because it's the reason why we know all of our friends," adds Josh. "More than anything, it's a way to connect with each other. Hardcore represents the people I love more than anything."

"We want to make sure with every win we get, that our community comes with us," says Jem. They namecheck Last Ride Records, photographers Rodzy and Candace Krieger, Elliott Gallart at Charmeleon Studios (where *Forge Ahead* is recorded). "However big this pie gets, it's not just a SPEED pie, we want everyone to get a piece."

In an age where things feel so atomised, it is crucial to nurture culture and community; for the sake of those that grow up in the dour, lonely, and oppressive landscape of suburbia where culture is limited to Gloria Jeans chains and late-night shopping, and the future seems non-existent.

"Hardcore is such an important thing, so many people could get so much out of it you know—young kids," says Jem. "The values that we have, in terms of creating something significant and being able to hold onto something right now in a world where the individual seems so suppressed, and the significance of the individual seems so diminished.

"Hardcore is a space where anything you do is meaningful and should be treasured. That is such an important thing, such a special thing."

The mood is optimistic when reckoning with the future of Australian hardcore. It feels like a new dawn is upon us. There's a hunger for live music and connection. A readiness to be drawn closer together in a communion of mosh.

"It's literally a new era," says Jem. "This is the best time to capitalise on bringing people into the room to learn about hardcore and get charged about it."

"My vision is that there's a self-sufficient scene. That when SPEED pack up, there are shows you can go to every week. There's going to be bodies in the room and people excited, and bands going on tour, and venues that want to put on hardcore shows. Just a space where people can go to shows and know that they have this avenue." ®

Camp Cope

In the Eye of The Hurricane

BY
Tyler Jenke

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
Nick Mckk

TOKYO
AWESOME
IRON MAID

Forced to abandon initial plans for their third album in the wake of a global pandemic, Melbourne's Camp Cope have come out the other side, stronger than ever.

As Camp Cope's Georgia Maq, Kelly-Dawn Hellmrich, and Sarah Thompson all sit down at Fitzroy's Commercial Club Hotel in early January, it's clear that current events have been taking a toll. Freshly armed with an album that thematically approaches the idea of walking through hell and coming out the other side, it almost feels as though we're right back in the midst of it.

In a perfect world, the group wouldn't be talking to me right now–they'd be gearing up for an invite-only afternoon comeback show at the Northcote Social Club. Just days before it was set to take place, rising case numbers saw it quietly canned. But in true Camp Cope fashion, the band forged ahead, ignoring what feels like an impending apocalypse because, as their new album asserts, once you're at the bottom, the only way left to go is up.

Like any story, we can't talk about where we are without touching on where we've been. It was in August of 2015 that a nascent Camp Cope played their first show, with support slot opportunities for international names such as AJJ, The Hotelier, and Waxahtachee soon coming their way. Already armed with the songs that would make up their first record, the band's self-titled debut arrived in April of 2016. Critical acclaim followed, before international touring preceded the release of their second album, *How to Socialise & Make Friends*, which arrived in early 2018 and earned them both a Top Ten spot on the national charts and an ARIA Award nomination for Best Rock Album.

"Looking back, I'm sort of surprised at how well [the album] did because I listen back to it and I'm like, 'This is awful'," admits Maq.

"There wasn't a gap to be like, 'Wow, I can't believe we've got a record coming out'," recalls Thompson, who in addition to serving as the band's drummer, also works at their label, Poison City Records. "It was just like, 'Last one is finished, we've finished the tour, [and] we've got a month or something'. We quickly wrote it, quickly recorded it, put it out, and went on tour again. It's like we didn't think about it."

As Hellmrich adds, their second album was never made with the intention of writing a hit record to move themselves into the next stage of their career. It was about allowing the trio to grow as musicians, and to complement their repertoire with new songs that represented this artistic growth.

With a positive response to this growth, and with widespread media attention for their musical activism (single "The Opener" famously attacked male-heavy lineups on events such as the Falls Festival with the line, "*Yeah, just get a female opener, that'll fill the quota*"), Camp Cope kept on with the standard cycle a band goes through in the lead-up to an album. While Maq would release her debut solo album (the electronically-influenced *Pleaser*) in late 2019, the band had been intending to kick off the sessions for album number three soon after. Of course, life had other plans.

"It was three days before we were meant to fly to America to record the album in Philly, and the borders shut," Maq recalls. "Georgia, especially, has got a real emotional connection with Philly. So that was where we were going; we wanted something new," adds Hellmrich.

"If we write in a different environment, you might come up with a whole different sound, emotion, and stuff like that," she continues. "So I reckon if that had gone ahead, it would have been a completely different sounding record."

While the trio had a record's worth of music written before things went south, they admit a few of these tracks were completely canned, while three more were written at the end of 2020, including first single, "Blue". Ultimately, Maq admits there was something of a silver lining to taking more time to reflect on things, with some songs relating to since-closed chapters of her life falling by the wayside in favour of more relevant ones, though lockdown did leave her going "a bit mad" at one point.

"I made a whole electronic album, which no one's ever going to hear," Maq laughs. "That taught me how to produce stuff, how to write different parts, and that language [around] how to make a record. So when we ended up making the record, I knew how it worked, what I wanted, and I knew how to get what I wanted with it. I feel like if we'd recorded in Philly, it just would have been very different."

Noting that the album "would have sounded like a Philly record" had they gone with original plans to make the album in Philadelphia's Headroom Studios, Camp Cope ended up working alongside producer Anna Laverty at Sing Sing Recording Studios in Melbourne, with the final result almost appearing as something of a celebratory testament to the tenacious nature of the group's home city.

"After the way that Melbourne experienced the pandemic so differently to other states, making something beautiful and having that turn into a bit of a positive experience, it's almost like a whole other little celebration of Melbourne," explains Hellmrich. "And it's like, 'Oh, we got to make this album in a really, really hard time in Melbourne at that point', which is something that we can always look back on as a positive."

Though the initial premise of a pandemic provided the members of Camp Cope with a chance to extend their already well-earned break in their relentless cycle, it soon began to take its toll on the band. Though lucky enough to maintain their respective jobs (with Hellmrich in childcare and Maq requalifying as a nurse), it left the band feeling completely worn out by the time they got back into the swing of things.

"Physically, it was hard because we hadn't touched an instrument for like a year, so when we went back and started rehearsing once that was allowed, it was like everything felt wrong," recalls Thompson. "Like, 'How did the songs go? What did we write? Is it good? Is it still relevant?'."

"I had too much time to think about all the options of the songs," adds Hellmrich. "I feel like it was not easy to write because we had more time; it was harder for me. I found it really challenging."

Strangely though, the opportunity that was provided to the group was reminiscent of their early years, with the desire and need to craft a stellar third album that continues their musical evolution being replaced by an urge to simply do what would make them happy; the same mindset that followed into the recording of their self-titled debut.

"It's not like, 'Oh, we'll release an album, and it has to be appropriate to fit this scenario and this scenario, and whatever'," explains Hellmrich. "It's just like, 'Well, we actually don't know what we're going to do with it, whether we will be able to tour, what it's even going to look like to release an album in the future'. So we thought, all we need to do is make something that makes us happy and then we're proud of that. And that was what we did with the first album.

"That first album was about just making something that we really enjoyed and then going back to that. So it's like it's holding hands with the first album. It's like it's come a long way."

Rolling Stone Australia Editor Tyler Jenke *was named in TMN's 30 Under 30 Awards in 2020 and 2021.*

AT ITS HEART, Camp Cope's *Running with The Hurricane* showcases a new version of the band, one that has gone through hell and come out the other side "stronger, more loving, more peaceful and better friends", as Maq said in a statement. While lead single "Blue" sonically illustrates this shift thanks to a sound described as "softer", "more relaxed", and "more refined", it still captures their true essence. Meanwhile, the song's title track captures the themes of resilience, with Maq singing, "*There's no other way to go, the only way out is up*".

Both the album and track of the same name are borrowed from a Redgum song, written by Maq's late father, Hugh McDonald, and Michael Atkinson. Despite admitting she wasn't particularly a fan of the track, its title soon found itself representing the record as a whole, burning its way into her soul and noting that "it felt like my life had been boiled down and summarised by those four words".

"I asked [Atkinson]. I said, 'Hi, I've written a song called this, do you mind if I use it?' And he was like, 'Yeah, I was actually going to call my song something like "Running *in* a Hurricane"',"
Maq recalls.

"It just *feels* like an album title," she adds. "I think it really encapsulates everything that's happened since the second album where everything's just this big mess, and it's about how you deal with that. You can get caught up in it and get swept away, you can let it kill you, or you can just like fucking lose your mind."

Apart from the title, the presence of Maq's father also provides a bit of a 'full circle' moment for the group, too. Having been in the studio for their debut album and their 2017 split single with Philadelphia's Cayetana, his passing in late 2016 was soon felt strongly by the whole band, with 2018's *How to Socialise & Make Friends* even ending with a tribute to him by way of "I've Got You".

"He was in the studio with us for the first two releases, then we really felt the absence of him," explains Hellmrich. "It was very sad to not have him on the second album. But with this one it's like, he is there in a way, like *in* the album."

"I feel like there's like a piece of my dad in everything we've kind of done," Maq notes, "and this is me like adding in that piece without having a song about him or anything."

RUNNING WITH THE Hurricane shows Camp Cope feeling more at peace with who they are, their place in their world, and content as musicians. But there was still something of a fear when it came to releasing music after a few years away. Even though an evolved sound was noted with "Blue" (one that wouldn't have made the original version had they recorded in Philadelphia), the group note that it is ironically the one song on the record most like the rest of their catalogue, and possibly the best way to invite fans into their new album.

"I wasn't freaking out or investing too much [into what people thought of 'Blue']," Maq begins.

"Because in my head, I'm like, 'Well, global warming is going to kill us in eight years, we just went through a global pandemic, people are dying...' This shouldn't matter. It doesn't matter. It's just art. People are going to like it or they don't. It's all subjective anyway. Like, art isn't good or bad. It's just what it is, and if one person likes it, that's great.

> "When we went back and started rehearsing once that was allowed, it was like everything felt wrong."

"I feel like we've never done it to be liked. We've never done it to be famous. A lot of things have happened to us and we're just the result of that."

But while it shows their fearlessness, it also captures their desire to constantly grow as well. With Maq using some of her unintended time off to work on her voice and refine it as an instrument, this was representative of the approach she takes towards her entire musical career.

"I don't wanna stay stagnant and sound the same," Maq adds. "I want to level up. I want to get better at all these skills. I want to get better at songwriting just for the sake of getting better at songwriting. I want to keep growing and getting better and learning how to play piano and sing at the same time and not just play chords and stuff."

Of course, despite the band's desire to never rest on their laurels, there is something of a consistent 'winning formula' they like to use for their records, with the structure of all three of their albums currently following the same sort of musical guidelines.

"I like structuring an album in a certain way. The first record's like that, the second, and this one. I feel like the structure is incredibly similar," Maq explains. "Like, we always start with a 13-second bass solo, we end with an emo number that's usually acoustic. On this one, like it is *acoustic*, but then it blows up."

"Always start with the bass," laughs Hellmrich, "or else it's bad luck!"

DESPITE RELEASING AN album that sonically represents the efforts taken to overcome adversity and difficulties, the record arrives at a time when it feels as though we're right back where we started–the same environment which halted the *initial* recording sessions.

COVID-related restrictions still continue to make touring a difficult minefield through which to navigate, and general uncertainty makes planning anything a fool's errand.

"There's obviously plans [to tour], but at the end of the day, I don't think any of us are like, 'Fuck it, let's just play and give 2,000 people COVID'," explains Thompson.

"Everyone's got their own thing going on. It's been two years of not working, and everyone's got their reasons for doing stuff. But I think we're a band where if it doesn't feel good, we just wait."

Whatever happens though, it's obvious that after getting through the years that have been, Camp Cope are capable of anything, and from here, the only way is up.

"All we need to do is make something that makes us happy and then we're proud of that."

"I feel like we've never done it to be liked. We've never done it, to be famous. A lot of things have happened to us and we're just the result of that."

"I don't wanna stay stagnant and sound the same."

NICK MCKK

THE UNDER-COVER NAZI

For decades, he infiltrated biker gangs and white-supremacist groups. Now, he's telling his story to sound the alarm about the threat of far-right extremists in America

BY PAUL SOLOTAROFF

Photograph by **Mike Belleme**

WE'LL COME to the homegrown terrorists he foiled and the race war they tried to foment. To the journalists he saved from assassination and the synagogue marked for carnage in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. To the gun-rights march on the steps of a state capitol, where they planned to pick off cops and rallygoers. There's time enough to valorise the work of Scott B, an undercover fed who breached far-right death squads and squashed their national web of terror cells. (Scott requested that his surname not be used for the sake of his family's safety.) Last summer, when he retired at 50 from the FBI, Scott left the bureau as one of the most storied agents since Joe Pistone, the real-life Donnie Brasco. For two-plus decades, he cracked landmark cases and won every laurel they give to undercovers. Months out of the game, though, he can't stop brooding over the threat he left behind. He knows better than anyone that it's later than we think, and that each day brings us closer to the next 9/11—this one launched by our own children. But first, we need to talk about the ram. Because that ram—actually, a terrified goat with diarrhoea—died for all our sins of the past four centuries. It is Halloween evening 2019, and Scott—

DEEP COVER
"What I do isn't acting, 'cause acting'll get you killed," Scott says. "I'm just out here being darker shades of me."

undercover coordinator for the FBI and special agent dispatched to its Joint Terrorism Task Force—is shivering in three layers, including tactical gear, in the pitch-black woods of northern Georgia. He has infiltrated a domestic-terror group called the Base, posing as a former skinhead who calls himself PaleHorse and is expert in hand-to-hand combat. Scott and 11 Base members are walking an unmarked path to a clearing above a creek bed. He doesn't know most of the men he's with; they've come from far distances to this encampment on a farm for a four-day training block on guerrilla warfare. Five of them travelled from Northeast states with assault rifles and armour in their car trunks. Another, a young psycho who calls himself ZoomGnat, has been up for two days straight on Adderall and Red Bull and has driven from Texas without stopping. None of them call one another by their given names, only their noms de guerre: Pestilence, PunishSnake, BigSiege, etc. Several are ex-military with munitions training and the wherewithal to take out power stations. Others are self-taught tactical freaks who shoot and move as nimbly as paratroopers. The internet will teach you anything these days, including how to start a race war in three steps.

The day had broken mild but turned bone-cold later, and was now, after many hours of slanting rain, a misery of mud and wind. When they came to the clearing, the members lit torches and formed a circle around the fire. Incantations were spoken by one of the men, citing the Wild Hunt and other gross misreadings of pre-Christian and Norse mythology. And then—because this was a sacrament not to the gods but to the massacre of Jews, Blacks, and gays—it was time to sacrifice the trembling animal they'd kidnapped from a neighbour's farm.

The goat, all 80-something pounds of him soaking wet, was shitting and bleating in prostrate fear of these men in death masks and camo. The man leading the ritual—code name: Eisen—swung the machete overhead. He hesitated a moment, then brought the blade down; it bounced off the animal with a whomp. Goats aren't built for ritual kills, as it happens: the scruffs of their necks are double-reinforced with back straps of gristle and fur. After further attempts at holy butchery, someone had the bright idea to just shoot the thing already. But this, too, quickly became a clusterfuck. Eisen looked away as he pointed the pistol—and the members, after all, were in a *circle*. One of them could have died if he misfired.

And so Scott, who in real life is a sniper-grade marksman and who teaches his fellow agents how to shoot, stepped in to school the young neo-Nazi on the rudiments of gun safety. But the goat didn't die after a single headshot; its legs kept flailing, as if to taunt Eisen for being such a weasel. Finally, Eisen put a second slug in him. Now, the dark sacrament could begin.

Someone slit the animal's throat and filled a chalice with the blood that came glomping out. The men passed the chalice around the fire, each taking sips from the cup. By the time it got to Scott, though, the blood had somehow chunked into dim-sum lumps of plasma and—oh, hell no, he's not drinking that mess. He dipped a pinky into the chalice and touched it to his lips as one of the men began to vomit. Not a genteel purge but the full-boat Linda Blair, the contents of his dinner spraying the trees. *Sweet Jesus,* Scott thought as he looked around the campfire at these misfits in training for mayhem. He was the only Christian at this devil's mass, and the only functional adult on hand. While some of the others took hits of acid and spooked themselves by talking to the severed goat's head, Scott stood as close to the fire as he could. "It was so fucking cold, and I couldn't warm up in my truck: I was taping the whole thing on audio recorder."

Scott is telling this story in the study of his farmhouse high up a hill in the Appalachians. It hunches like a fort on its timbered perch, with assault rifles and armour in the linen closet and kill-shot sight lines of the unmarked road running past his drive. As he talks, he screens footage that he took of those men through a hidden cam on his person. It was wildly risky work, taping terrorists with long guns in woods miles from his support team. It is no less risky to be showing this film and revealing these details for mass consumption. Scott has never been named in public, even at criminal trials. So thorough was the evidence he gathered covertly that every defendant he ever arrested pleaded out.

But he's breaking his covenant now for the reason he took that footage: he is haunted by what the people onscreen will do if their movement—and their moment—aren't thwarted. Over months of interviews with Scott and his former colleagues, hours-long conversations with domestic-terror experts, and wormhole dives down fascist portals on apps like Gab and Discord, a portrait emerged of a nation under threat from a thousand points of hate. "We've seen massive increases in plots and acts" committed by domestic terrorists, says Bruce Hoffman, a Georgetown professor and counterterror authority whose *Inside Terrorism* is the master text on the subject. "Me and my team lay awake nights kicking the walls, because there's a million-and-a-half guys online plotting murder," says Rita Katz, the founder and director of the SITE Intelligence Group, and the author of the forthcoming *Saints and Soldiers,* which tracks the rise of far-right terror in the age of Trump. "We're in a business where we can't be wrong once," says Scott. "And there's way more of them than us undercovers."

I ask him how he endured those spectral hours in the company of such fools. Scott stiffens and pulls up pictures on his phone.

"This," he flashes the photo of a teen with a bowl haircut and a sunk-chest, scarecrow build, "is Dylann Roof. He killed nine people in a church."

"And this," he flashes the photo of a crew-cut dork in glasses, "is Patrick Crusius. He's charged with killing 23 at a Walmart in Texas. So don't think for a second you can read these boys by how they look on Twitter."

Then Scott fetches up a meme he pulled off one of the apps where rageful kids meet up. It is a viral poster of the so-called saints who inspire white terrorists worldwide. At the top is Saint Breivik—as in Anders Breivik, the Norwegian who slaughtered 69 people at a summer camp for kids, and another eight in Oslo with a van bomb. Just below him is Saint Tarrant—as in Brenton Tarrant, the Australian who murdered 51 people in a pair of New Zealand mosques. Two down from him is Robert Bowers, the Pennsylvania trucker who allegedly slew 11 at a synagogue in Pittsburgh. This meme is a totem pole for Nazi youth in training, the standings in a pennant race of killers. Bracketing their stat lines is a phrase in block chalk: "Will you make it onto the leaderboard . . . in the fight for white survival?"

"YOU CAN'T READ THESE BOYS BY HOW THEY LOOK ON TWITTER. WE CAN'T BE WRONG ONCE," SAYS SCOTT. "AND THERE'S WAY MORE OF THEM THAN US UNDERCOVERS."

SCOTT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE any guardian you've met, unless by "guardian" you mean the cooler at a Vegas strip joint who keeps the drunks off the girls with a black-eyed glare. He's been lifting all his life and has the setup to prove it: mail-box quads and meat-plough arms that dispose him to sleeveless tees. At 6ft 4in and 118kg, he fills up a room without meaning to, though he never wastes time trying to merge with his surroundings. He's funny and profane and could charm a lampshade off its base with his whiskey-sour drawl and Harley swagger. Small wonder that even strangers at the Quik-Mart call him Tex, though he's as much from Amarillo as you or me.

But being a giant with full tat sleeves is its own disguise: no one sees you and thinks "plainclothes cop" hiding cameras in your leathers. That's the trademark of a crack undercover: a genius for playing yourself. "What I do isn't acting, 'cause acting'll get you killed," says Scott. "I'm just out here being darker shades of me." He tartly describes his targets—homicidal bikers who beat their victims with hammers; racist gangsters who pimp out their women under the sobriquet "Aryan angels"—as "my ass-out country cousins", rednecks raised in the same locus he was but who went right when he went left. "If I hadn't've played [foot]ball in college and been friends with lots of Black guys, I might've shared a few of their views," he says. Scott drains the last of his third Jack Daniel's—he drinks the stuff like seltzer—then laughs at the thought of espousing hate. "Yeah, nah, probably not. I ain't big on stupid."

Still, playing Klansmen and hired killers, he had the chops to infiltrate homegrown terror. For 28 years in law enforcement—first as an investigator a

US contributing editor PAUL SOLOTAROFF *wrote the true-crime story "The Devil You Know" in September.*

CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER
From top: For Operation Road Kill, Scott went undercover in 2006 to take down the Outlaw motorcycle gang; he infiltrated the Klan for Operation Smoking Robes in 2017, which led to the arrest of a man who was allegedly planning to shoot up a synagogue; graduating from the academy in 1993.

year out of college at a county sheriff's office in the Carolinas, then as a shooting star at the FBI—he's been working his way into, and out of, tight spaces, breaching outfits that chop up cop impostors. Sitting in the crates he brought home when he retired are the field notes and transcripts of every case he's worked. They corroborate the accounts he's giving here and chart the plagues of the past three decades—the flood tide of drugs from the five cartels penetrating our southern border; the poisoning of the suburbs by Big Pharma and the opioid mills they helped spawn; and the radioactive gush of white supremacy through the fire hose of social media. Scott seems almost wistful now to recall the Nineties, when the bogeyman in America was crack cocaine.

By his count, there are 600 FBI agents who are certified as UCEs (undercover employees). But some of them do the work of "backstopping" agents: creating false credentials and social media profiles for UCEs working in the field. Of the several hundred people who do face-to-face ops, most have only handled a couple of cases as the primary undercover. "There's maybe 50 in the country who've done five or more ops—and then the rare few who've done double digits," says Shawn McAlpin, a prolific UCE who retired to run a cannabis dispensary. Scott has done dozens, though they tend to run together; he has, after all, a type. "No one's gonna send me in on corporate crimes; my country ass would be laughed out of the boardroom," he says.

And so he made his name doing the dirty jobs, often juggling several ops at once. He infiltrated the Outlaws—a national biker gang that rivals the Hells Angels in size—and sent 16 members or their associates to prison for guns, drugs, extortion, and violent crimes. Hours before they swung a huge dope deal one night, they summoned Scott to their clubhouse in Taunton, Massachusetts. Scott was kitted out with his standard trousseau: a tiny camera and a recording chip secreted on his person (it would breach trade-craft to say precisely where). They ordered him—at gunpoint—to get naked.

Scott was stunned; he'd been undercover for 18 months and committed six crimes with them already. (Or so they thought.) "Not gonna lie to you: my asshole was knittin' a sweater, going chicka-chicka-chicka as I stripped," he says. They searched Scott and his garments, but missed the microcamera—a providence he chalks up to his god. Later, at one of the strip joints they called home, his adrenaline dump turned to rage. "Fuck you, motherfuckers," Scott hissed, turning purple. "Tomorrow, before the drop, I'm making all you bitches strip!"

Next up was Operation Poetic Justice: a sheriff's office in the hillbilly South dealing drugs, untaxed cigarettes, and taking bribes. "There was so much corruption, it seeped into government, because everyone was related up there," says Mike MacLean, Scott's FBI supervisor in Knoxville. Before Scott and his team took down 50 people, including cops and their family members, he was sitting with a deputy's relative one night when the guy pulled a shotgun, hammers cocked. "I find out you the law, you a dead man," said the relative, baring his toothless gums in a snarl. Months later, after the takedown, Scott sat with the man again, introducing himself as FBI. "Aw, hell, I knew you was law the whole time," said the relative. "Yeah?" said Scott, who hears that often, post-arrest. "Then why'd you sell me coke for a year?" "Oh, that's 'cause I like you," said the man.

Compound that criminal dementia with fanaticism and you get the pretzel logic of white power. In the hate groups that he breached, Scott encountered credos that only cracked-out satirists could conceive. One night, he sat up drinking bourbon with a Klansman who laid out the dual-seed theory. In the Garden of Eden, it was Adam, Eve, and Abel, and Abel, born of Adam, sired the white race. Then came the snake with forbidden fruit—only, the "fruit" was Eve sleeping with the snake. The snake, being Satan, fathered Cain and the mud people, starting off with the Jews. Then, you got your Blacks, gays, commies, and Asians: they're all the seed of Satan, too. Christians can kill them and it ain't a sin to do so, since they're hellspawn who don't have souls.

The names of the demons changed as Scott roved the racist circuit: lizard people, beasts of the field, short-faced bears. The rules changed, too, even under the same flag. Aryan Nation disciples in the state of Tennessee trafficked dope and guns and pimped their girls on Backpage, often to Black and brown johns. This raised the hackles of the Right Rev Richard Butler, who'd founded Aryan Nations in the Seventies. From his compound in Idaho, he sent cease-and-desist letters to those crystal-tweaking heathens down South. For months, he harassed them to change their name; they told him to go fuck himself. Finally, Butler capitulated: they could call themselves Aryan Nation if they studied Scripture with him. And so it came to pass: the Tennessee apostates got religion and kept selling speed to all comers. Scott busted that crew in 2018, sending 44 members to the pen. "For all their Christian bullshit, they were moving tons of product," he says, and using the criminal proceeds to grow their base.

Asked if he'd challenged them to square the contradiction, Scott lets out a snort. "I'm talking to this neo-Nazi and said, 'Why do y'all hate Blacks so much?' He goes, 'They're lazy, and they mooch off their family and the county.' I said, 'OK, so where you living these days?' 'Um, well, right now, I'm staying by my girlfriend's mama's.' 'Right, and what do you do for work?' 'Well, I'm kinda between jobs at the moment.' I just started laughing and said, 'Is it me, or are you the very thing you just described hating?'"

F SCOTT HAD DONE NOTHING but "enterprise crimes"–drug gangs, corrupt cops, human-trafficking cases–he'd have blazed a big trail at the bureau. But he was spinning his wheels working narcotics rips and badly wanted out of that box. So in 2015, he arranged his own transfer to the Joint Terrorism Task Force in Tennessee. Created by the bureau in 1980, JTTFs are regional strike teams blending feds, cops, troopers, and linguists tracking terror threats at home. Back then, no one in Washington deemed the far-right groups a high-priority target. "For several years, our unit had been a lacklustere crew, not known for having ass kickers," says Scott. That changed in a hurry with him around. He built the case on the Aryan Nations that lasted 18 months. The windfall payoff in arrests and seizures showed DTOS–the Domestic Terror command in Washington–"that you could bring major cases against white supremacists, and that we needed more bodies" to do so, he adds.

The bureau soon doubled the size of his team; Scott spread his reach to other states. Posing as an outlaw biker, he infiltrated a Klan cell suspected of making ghost guns for sale. One night in a remote field in Scottsboro, Alabama, they blindfolded him and ordered him to his knees: he was "naturalised," or inducted, by a green-gowned wizard. For months, he attended their Klan Kraft Klasses and played Lynyrd Skynyrd at their rallies. Scott, who shreds like a poor man's Dave Mustaine, would get four songs in and run out of suitable numbers. "You can't rock Hendrix for the Klan," he says. So he'd wail Southern standards as they doused their 30-foot torch with diesel fuel.

At those Klan meetups, Scott caught wind of a man who was bent on bad intentions. "He'd post pictures of synagogues on his Facebook page and say, 'I'm gonna do something big'." Scott arranged to meet the man while posing as a closer. (The closer is the guy who supplies the "iron", be it a gun or bomb for an attack.) On January 12 2017, he picked up Benji McDowell at his home in Conway, South Carolina; they drove to Myrtle Beach to talk targets. "This was right around the time Dylann Roof was on trial," says Scott. "Benji said he wanted to do something in the style of Roof, only on a grander scale."

Scott wasn't sure what to make of McDowell, an overstuffed pillow of a 30-year-old stoner who came off as a soft-brained teen. Countless idiots shitpost heinous threats but lack the will or means to see them through. Scott made McDowell for one of those losers, a sense compounded when he sparked up a joint in the back seat of Scott's sedan. "Put that out!" Scott barked at him, boiling mad. "You don't know what I got in the trunk, or what my priors are!" McDowell was so scared that he swallowed the joint. He later threw up in a parking lot.

But that night, Scott got a call from Benji: "I want a 40-cal and hollow points." Scott returned in February to deliver the gun–minus firing pin, of course. "He was good to go in the next week or two," says Scott. "He had intel on an event at a temple [in Myrtle Beach] where lots of kids and families would be present." The drop-off happened at Scott's motel. Cops swarmed McDowell in the car park. Later, at the station, he gave a rueful confession. "I'm glad y'all stopped me when you did," said McDowell. "I was fixin' to do something bad." Scott notes that McDowell got a wrist slap–33 months in prison for an illegal weapon. "The loophole is, there's no domestic-terror law: You can't bust a guy for saying 'All Jews must die'. So you wind up working whatever charge you can just to get 'em off the street."

He had no time to brood about sentence guidelines, though: there was another plot afoot at an industrial plant. A white man enraged at his Black superiors sought a bomb to blow up the place. Scott reached out to him through a source, posing again as a closer. But leery of leaving a voice trail, the man declined to talk. Instead, he texted Scott the thing he was after: an emoji of a bomb going *ka-boom*. After months of pinging from his personal phone, the perp switched his aim to the home of his bosses, who happened to be a married couple. Travis Dale Brady was pinched when he took possession of a dummy bomb delivered by the feds. "He was no wiz at op-security," says Scott, "but stupid people kill people all the time. Like the other guy [McDowell], he had the heart and drive to do it. And last time I checked, dead is dead."

PLANNING TO SET OFF "THE BOOGALOO"
Scott's work led to the arrests of Luke Lane, Jacob Kaderli, and Michael Helterbrand (from left). All three were members of the Base, a white-supremacist network determined to set off a race war in America.

Scott couldn't have known it at the time, of course, but he was feeling the first tremors underfoot: a wave of white terror that built in 2017 and has been breaking on our beaches ever since. There were horrific hate-based murders in New York and Portland, Oregon, that spring. Then, come summer, the deluge: Charlottesville, Virginia. For two days, men with long guns paraded Nazi flags through the streets of that quaint town. Cops and troopers stood by, watching, as dozens were injured in a festival of hate and horror. But even the footage of James Fields J ploughing his Dodge into a crowd, then backing up and hitting even more pedestrians after killing Heather Heyer, didn't centre domestic terror as a frontline threat. "That whole time, I had to fight like hell to keep my Aryan Nation op alive," says Scott. "The International Terror Section were the big dogs. We in DTOS weren't deemed as important."

He and his fellow agents were flummoxed. There were groups at that rally plotting mass destruction, the worst of them the Atomwaffen Division. A global gang of white boys in their teens and early twenties, they'd been baptised in fire by the teachings of James Mason, whose banned book, *Siege*, is a syllabus for racists. Mason, a greying neo-Nazi living quietly in northern Colorado, has been grooming sociopaths since the early Eighties. He's one of the founding fathers of the "accelerationist" movement: a ragtag consortium of far-right ragers who think society's on the brink of full collapse. The job of accelerationists is to speed the plough, springing attacks on people and institutions that set the stage for race war in the streets. In that banquet of blood–the "boogaloo," as they call it–the ones with the biggest guns will prevail. Then, the terrorists can claim their caliphate: a bone-white ethnostate, armed to the teeth, that is by, for, and about the master race.

But Mason's goons in Atomwaffen were fuzzy about their targets. One of them, Nicholas Giampa, killed his girlfriend's parents because they didn't want her dating a white supremacist. Another, Devon Arthurs, killed his two roommates, both Atomwaffen boys. A third member, Samuel Woodward, stabbed his date to death after a gay hookup in California.

Those slayings were the stumbles of a lethal bunch. Three members–all Marines in a cell at Jacksonville's Camp Lejeune–were planning to take out power plants with homemade thermite bombs. They'd already formed a "death squad" and were selling no-trace rifles to conspirators around the state. A member in Las Vegas targeted a local temple; he aimed to detonate an IED, then pick off panicked congregants as they fled. These kids were such bloodcurdling posters on Gab that the feds finally acted in 2018. They sent Scott west, as part of an undercover squad, to the Destroying Texas Fest that summer. Black-metal bands with names like Satanic Goat Ritual were playing at a club in Houston; several Atomwaffen members would be there. One of the plans was for Scott et al, to stage a "cold bump". One of them would pick a fight with the leader, John Cameron Denton, then Scott would jump in to "save" him. As it turned out, they didn't have to fake the brawl. Other agents infiltrated Denton's cell and arrested him and five others for plots against reporters, Blacks, and Jews. That freed Scott for his biggest case: the seven-month op to smash the Base.

If you're a top producer for the FBI, your career can take one of two paths. Some time in your thirties, you're encouraged to climb the ladder by applying for the position of SSA (supervisory special agent). There's a big bump in salary, you may get home in time for dinner, and it's a straight shot up to the boss's job. Alas, the great undercovers shun that route, disdainful as they are of careerist cops. "Guys like us don't think of climbing the ladder; we crave this shit too much to want to stop," says McAlpin, the retired UCE. Instead, stars like Scott often stay in their lane and build their brand by becoming master teachers. By the time he switched over to Domestic Terror in 2015, Scott was the tactical instructor of his division, and ran its firearms-qualification courses. He was also a tough-love mentor at the Undercover School, a two-week crucible of stress and sleep loss that breaks some of the candidates who enroll. "It's a horrific experience because it has to be; we're preparing you for the worst of the worst," says Terry Rankhorn, an undercover coordinator and master instructor who retired in 2019. "You'll have guns at your head, a rope around your neck; we've never killed anyone, but we've air-lifted students to hospitals."

FLOYD COUNTY POLICE/AP IMAGES, 3

TAKING DOWN THE BASE
For his last mission, Scott spent seven months as a member of a neo-Nazi outfit known as the Base. The men decried the "Zionist Occupied Government", trained in the woods with military equipment, and were planning mass murder.

Scott was in Phoenix to train online coverts when he ran into a compadre from Ohio. He and "Jim", a veteran cop assigned to Joint Terror, were the Hans and Franz twins of undercover: two hyper-muscled men with full-dress Harleys and enough tats to start a biker gang. Each of them had heard the buzz about the Base and wanted to get a case going fast. So one night, they bought a fifth of their favourite poison and stayed up building Scott an alias. Using fascist pen names, they made his social media a fount of Holocaust slurs. But try as they might, it proved problematic to get booted off Facebook, or "Jewbook", as young racists like to call it. A screenshot of your ouster is a very useful chip if you're seeking instant cred with terror groups.

So Scott took it on himself to just tag the Base directly. He wrote to the web address they posted on Gab, going by WhiteWarrior88. That night, they emailed him a questionnaire. Several days of back-and-forth led to a voice chat with some of the members, including a man calling himself Roman Wolf. Scott was asked about his combat skills and what he was willing to risk for his beliefs. Accelerationists love to boast that they're leaderless cells, and that their crypto skills shield them from being breached. But it had taken Scott a day to reach the Base online, and a week to speak to their leader directly.

Said leader, Roman Wolf–real name: Rinaldo Nazzaro–was no blood-and-soil warlord whose hateful worldview stemmed from combat horrors. Wolf graduated prep school in New Jersey and dropped out of Villanova, where he presented himself as an anarchist opposed to government meddling. He had nothing in common with the Base kids he exhorted to "finish" what Hitler started. Those boys were dirt-floor loners in the rural South, while Wolf and his wife lived comfortably in Russia after leaving America in 2018. Everything about him sounded gassy and self-inflated, from his credentials as a mercenary in the Middle East theatre to his counterterror chops at an intel firm. There is evidence that he worked for the Department of Homeland Security from 2004 to 2006, but he didn't learn much tradecraft on the job. The firewall he built around his white-terror op has been breached, time and again, by media types. He bought land, for instance, in Washington state to stage hate camps for the Base, but the site was doxxed by a *Vice* reporter and swarmed by antifa types. The kids in his western cell quickly quit the group, and Wolf had to start all over in the East.

The day after his interview, Scott was asked to join the Base. Wolf put him in touch with the nearest cell leader–a guy in Rome, Georgia, named Luke Lane. "I didn't know it then, but he was the bastard we'd been hunting under his call name, TMB [The Militant Buddhist]," says Scott. "Outta all of 'em in the cell, Lane was the most gonzo. He'd be up till dawn posting seriously crazy shit." A week or two later, Scott drove to meet Lane near a statue of a–yes, lord–Roman wolf. Lane, 20, and Pestilence, 19, approached Scott in the standard issue of young fascists: black BDUs bloused into combat boots. Lane told Scott to put his cell on airplane mode, then wanded him with a contraption he'd never seen. "It was this detector that picks up waves from any recording device–and my team had put a tracker on my truck," says Scott.

Two thoughts went through him in a blur: *This'll be the shortest undercover in history* (it wasn't–he'd parked under a power line, fuzzing the rod's reception), and *How are these kids buying equipment the FBI doesn't have?* That question, or something like it, came up again all weekend as he scoped out the armoury they'd amassed. Each member of the Base who came to Lane's place had a kit he could hit the ground with in Tikrit. Set aside their long guns with which they aired out Star of David targets. What stunned Scott was all their ancillary gear: bulletproof vests with ceramic plates that could stop an AK round, and loaded battle-rattles holding gas masks and mag clips and everything you'd need in a firefight. "These boys were tight," says Scott in grudging awe. "Their shoot-and-move skills, their magazine dumps–for home-schooled dudes, they were pretty squared away."

Scott says Lane lived on a farm that wasn't fit for habitation. There was a house on the property encircled by trash, but that was somehow rented to a tenant. Lane and his father bunked in the loft of their converted barn, where they shared a kitchen and bathroom with Lane's sister. The father worked construction and was gone all day, but neither his son nor Lane's best friend had a job. Pestilence–real name: Jacob Kaderli–was an unemployed teen who somehow scrounged the cash to pay for combat gear. Helter-Skelter–real name: Michael Helterbrand–was the only Georgia member with a steady check. He worked in IT. Lane was the oddest of the three, though, says Scott: an eighth-grade dropout who'd quit school to read *Mein Kampf* and trade firearms online all night. Scott never saw his bedroom, but heard from the other members that it harboured an arsenal. "That's how he had money to buy new gear," says Scott. "Buying and selling on armslist.com."

At night, after hours of training manoeuvres and honing their Sieg Heil poses, the Base boys would sit beneath an awning by the barn, drinking Jägermeister and trading tin-foil theories. "Pestilence

would be talking about the Earth being concave, that Hitler proved it by firing rockets that came down," says Scott. "Then someone would say, 'No, bullshit. Hitler's living in Middle Earth, along with a race of giants'." And Lane would declaim against the "ZOG," or the Zionist Occupied Government [of America]. For all their pagan bluster and dreams of an ethnostate, Scott couldn't help but ask these sex-starved boys how they planned to sire the master race. "Oh, that's easy," said one of them. "We'll just kidnap bitches and rape 'em till they give us kids."

There was a lot of this sort of thing over the next three months. Scott (rechristened PaleHorse) drove to Georgia twice a month and met his support team at their off-site. Installed in a defunct schoolhouse, the feds wired him up to record for two days straight. (They also flew a plane overhead that filmed the group's movements from four miles up.) For 48 hours, his backups eavesdropped as the Base boys burned Bibles and US flags, cut themselves to bleed on blocks of Norse runes, and raged against Jesus and "the rest of his fucking Jews". What the feds didn't hear were the names and dates of targets; the Georgia cell took pains to speak vaguely. Scott sensed they were hatching something, but couldn't get them to say it. Meanwhile, his case kept getting bigger.

Sometime in August, three other men showed up; one became a fixture at the farm. He had a fringy beard and was evasive about his background, but his Manitoba twang gave him away. Patrik Mathews was a corporal in the Canadian Reserves trained in explosives who'd fled Canada after being outed as a neo-Nazi by a reporter. Half the FBI was looking for Mathews, who'd snuck across the border weeks before. Members of the Georgia cell were awed by his prowess and his commitment to the cause. Lane's father let him stay at the farm, where, per Scott, Mathews slept in a horse stall for two months.

Then there were the other two who'd come down with him. Can't-Go-Back—real name: Brian Lemley—was an Army vet and truck driver who'd scooped up Mathews near the border and harbored him for a while in Virginia. Eisen—real name: William Bilbrough—was another middle-earther and self-taught ninja whose martial skills weren't worth a damn. Those three wanted to start a race war ASAP. Mathews, who'd named himself PunishSnake, had the self-assurance of the psychotic. He was, he said, "invisible", the perfect killing machine because, as far as anyone knew, he was dead. Drunk or sober, he'd foam at the mouth about downed power lines and poisoned water supplies. That fall, when they formed their own cell in Delaware, Mathews and Lemley built a ghost gun from parts, hatched plans to assassinate cops for their weapons, and roughed out a plot on a gun rally on the Capitol steps in Virginia.

Meanwhile, Scott was under blue-flame pressure to bust the Georgia cell. It is murderously expensive to build a multistate op on a terror group that keeps growing. By October, the feds had dozens of members in their sights, and offices from New York to LA were opening cases against suspects in their region. Scott would man the phones once a week at 10am, briefing the other teams about his progress. Sometimes, he says, "there were a hundred people on the line—and a whole bunch of backstabbing going down. Alliances and antipathies formed between regions: "Some of us divisions were on the same sheet of music, saying 'Where's the imminent threat? Just play this out.' Whereas other teams were like, 'These guys are unstable! People are gonna die if we don't move'."

Well, of course, they're unstable, Scott thought but didn't say. *That's what I'm counting on.*

IT IS, TO CORRUPT TOLSTOY, a truth self-evident: every unhappy family is alike. The Base, a paranoid clan with no shared past or people skills, was rigged to explode before it fired the first shot or laid its first bomb outside a church. Scott says Lane, who'd idolised Mathews in August, was plotting to blow his brains out that fall. He'd had it with Mathews' "fed talk"—the loosey-goosey mentions of murder and mayhem that draw the eyes and ears of the FBI. Also—and this was a problem—Mathews "knew too much", mostly because Lane had spilled his plans to him.

That Halloween weekend, Lane and Pestilence shared those plans with Scott. Sitting around a campfire after everyone else had left, they told him to put his phone on ice. "We've developed targets we're going after," said Pestilence. Lane didn't divulge names, but wanted to know if Scott was up for whatever. "Brothers, you know this," said Scott. "Just tell me when and where—and give me a couple days to clear the decks."

Just before Thanksgiving, Scott got a blast on Wire, via a channel used only by the cell. Be back here in mid-December, said Lane, and bring your whole kit "for a family-friendly camping trip". Scott drove down there on the appointed day, making sure to arrive before the others. "Whattaya got?" he asked Lane, just the two of them by the barn. We're gonna go whack some people, Lane whispered: an antifa couple living an hour away. "Well, dang," said Scott, trying to stall for time. "That ain't nothin' I want to drive my personal truck to." He peppered Lane with questions: Who lives in the house with them? Are there children and pets present? How close is their bedroom to the neighbours?

"THESE GUYS ARE UNSTABLE! PEOPLE WILL DIE IF WE DON'T MOVE," SAID A FED. WELL, OF COURSE, THEY'RE UNSTABLE, SCOTT THOUGHT. THAT'S WHAT I'M COUNTING ON.

Lane admitted he knew none of those things; he agreed to delay the hit to do recon. "Forget it," said Scott. "I'll get the intel myself." His cover job—site surveying—gave him credentials to pull deeds and housing floor plans. He slow-walked that "research" and took a stealth trip up North, training with Mathews and Lemley in Delaware. The two cells had come to truly loathe each other, and Scott worked the rift on both ends. "I don't like the way Lane treats you guys," he said. "We're supposed to be on the same side." Mathews entreated him to join their cell, then let him in on the plot.

Sitting in their flat in Newark, Delaware, Scott sipped his whiskey and nodded as they sketched it out. There was a Second Amendment rally in Virginia, they said, that figured to be a powder keg. Democrats had just taken power in the state and were planning stiff gun-control measures. While tens of thousands of people milled the Capitol steps, they'd set up in a tree line a hundred yards back and start picking off cops and troopers. A circular firing squad would spark off: Cops would shoot the gun nuts, gun nuts would shoot antifa, and bystanders would be cut down in the middle. As Scott winked at a wall cam that the feds installed while the two men were off at work, Mathews rambled on about his plans. After the rally, they'd slip away and become a roving death squad, posing as homeless men to stalk their targets. At night, gloved and hooded, they'd follow a reporter to his car, put a couple rounds in the back of his head, then move to the next city and lefty target.

Scott had gotten enough to bag the Delaware cell. But he needed a little luck now to take down the Georgia crew. It doesn't suffice to tape people talking murder—they actually have to do something to further that plot in order for charges to stick. It was January 2020, and the window was closing fast. If Scott didn't act before the rally in nine days, the Georgia cell would scatter once Mathews fell.

On January 12, Scott drove back to Rome: Lane announced that the hit was going down. Scott's pulse raced when he heard what they'd acquired. They had bought catch bags for their brass—sacks that clip to the ejection ports of rifles and catch the expended shells as they pour out. They had drilled a silencer for a pistol, and would go out and buy frog tape to cinch their pant-legs so they didn't leave stray skin cells at the scene. (They also said they'd grab a package of adult diapers, having heard that people shit themselves doing their first murder.) Scott, for his part, produced some images of the house, but couldn't get the list of current tenants. "Well, whatever," said Helter-Skelter. "If there's kids there, let's whack 'em. I got no problem killing commie kids."

The original plan was for Helter to drive and the other three to go in blazing. But Helter had changed his mind: he wanted "to pop his cherry" instead of waiting in the truck. Otherwise, the blueprint remained the same. They'd rent a single room at a dive motel; there, they'd shower up, slough their dead skin off, and change into disposable murder gear. Scott would steal a truck with out-of-state plates, and someone would bring accelerants to torch the house. They'd be in and out in minutes, murder everything that moved, and leave behind a fireball for the cops.

On January 15, Scott called on Lane to take him out to lunch. Driving out of the farm, he turned off the dirt road when he heard an odd noise from his

pick-up. "Fuck!" he said to Lane as he pulled over. "If this truck's messin' up on me again . . ."

He got out and walked to the back of the truck when another pickup passed him on the road. The driver stopped and asked Scott if he needed help. While they talked, an armoured BearCat came over the hill, a gunner in the turret with an M-4. Scott and the other driver dove into the truck and tore off. A SWAT team surrounded Lane, guns drawn.

A couple of hours later, a team arrested Pestilence at his house two hours south, near Atlanta. His parents feigned innocence about their son's intentions, but Scott claims otherwise. "Pest said he would show his dad videos of our training sessions; hell, he said his dad used to take him to the gun range."

At five that afternoon, cops arrested Helter-Skelter as he left his IT job in Georgia. The three cell members were held without bail and booked for a raft of crimes: conspiracy to commit murder, arson, home invasion, and—eventually—animal cruelty to that goat. The next day, January 16, SWAT teams in two cities rolled up Mathews, Lemley, and Bilbrough. Big-Siege—real name: Yousef Barasneh—was busted with a second member for defacing houses of worship. Lanzer—real name: Richard Tobin—was charged with conspiracy in those crimes: He was the one who'd planned a nationwide assault on churches and temples. Months later, cops got ZoomGnat—real name: Duncan Trimmell—the deranged kid who'd driven all the way from Texas to take part in the Halloween gore. So, too, Dima—real name: Brandon Ashley; both were charged for beheading a goat.

In all, the bureau snared 11 members, effectively ending the group. So strong was the proof Scott gathered against them that they all took pleas and prison bids. Not so Nazzaro, the leader of the Base, who denies any part in their plots. At this writing, he sits, impregnable, at his redoubt in Russia, far beyond the reach of law enforcement. There, he recruits his next band of racists, protected by the US Constitution. Still an American citizen, he has the First Amendment right to polemicise the slaughter of civilians. Does he crave the fall of government and the erasure of Blacks and Jews, or are those just the tantrums of a middle-age troll from the dark side of the moon? For all anyone knows, he's an FSB proxy who cares only about planting false flags.

While on the subject of false flags: That antifa couple in Georgia? They were neither antifa nor a couple. Far from living together, they were total strangers who were photographed side by side at a rally. But that is what happens when you recruit child soldiers who can't read a caption below a picture. You seed the soil for war in which everyone's a foe, and the killers we fear the most are our own kids.

THEY THREW A DAY for Scott in his hometown when he retired; it was quite the swell affair of state. The mayor and lieutenant governor read proclamations of honour, the Domestic Terror brass flew in from DC, and one of their senior analysts gave a toast to his heroics. "No one in this room," she said, "has any idea how many lives this man saved these last five years." She congratulated Scott on his retirement and presented him a quart of aged bourbon. On the back of the bottle was a ghost engraving: the original G-man in a fedora, toting a tommy gun.

There were a hundred people gathered there to cheer on Scott; naturally, he rocked his own party. He played them "Purple Rain" and "Pride and Joy", bending notes until they begged for help. And then he did his version of "The Devil Named Music", because that song caught the blues of the undercover: "*Yes, I get tired of being alone / I miss my daughter / I miss my wife / But the devil named music is taking my life*." For most of three decades, he'd hardly ever been home, spending months on the road as a character with a rap sheet and a convincing cover story. "You can't play with the devil without the devil bleeding into you—and your family feels it way before you do," says Dave Redemann, an undercover instructor with 30 years' experience who trained Scott at UC school. "There's a guilt he has for not seeing his kids grow up, and he's one of the very few who's honest with young agents about the cost he's paid for doing this." Scott mourns the missed birthdays and the marital dust-ups, the calls from his sobbing wife "while I was halfway across the country, way overcommitted on a case." He's had spinal fusions on a back that broke twice; surgical reattachments of his biceps, knee, and shoulders; and a complete collapse in 2007, "burning the candle till it ran out of wax," he says. He'd been emptying the ocean of hate with a spoon, he says. "The shit I saw, I'm never gonna unsee."

And so, because he had to, Scott walked away cold. Closed his laptop, tossed his work phones, and logged off all the platforms: a funeral, of sorts, for his false selves. There's only so much evil you can will yourself to swallow before it turns to poison in your throat. When the back-taste overwhelms him, he gets on his blacked-out Harley and rides a twisty pass through the Appalachians. There's a river up there where he sits and eyes the current, listening to the tree frogs and cicadas. They sing to him, a tune he can't make out but which takes him somewhere better down the bend.

"'These guys are unstable! People will die if we don't move', said a FED. Well, of course, they're unstable, Scott thought. That's what I'm counting on."

Photograph by **Mike Belleme**

SPACE-AGE COLORWAYS. OTHERWORLDLY SHAPE.

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Reviews

Music

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SPOON

A consistently excellent Texas indie-rock band takes it to a whole new level

By JON DOLAN

Spoon
Lucifer on The Sofa
MATADOR
★★★★½

SPOON ARE the most reliable great American rock band of the past 25 years. That might say more about American rock than it does about Spoon, but facts don't lie. They've been at it since the mid-Nineties, and they've never made a dull record, thanks to leader Britt Daniel's brilliant songwriting and a knack for nuancing their Texas indie rock. They do jittery guitar bangers; they throw in some soul; they try out electronics; they nod to Prince and the Kinks and Motown and Wire. But it always comes out sounding like Spoon: casually stylish and stunningly catchy, opaque but openhearted, bristling with the thrill of subtle invention.

In fact, over the years Spoon have been so →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Sonia Kretschmar

SPOON

consistent you can almost take them for -granted. Which is why their tenth album, *Lucifer on The Sofa,* is so welcome.

It's the best thing they've ever done, more than exceeding their usual quotient of fire guitars, killer choruses, and crafty rock-history updates. Whether it's the barbed-glam stomp of "The Hardest Cut," the sidelong Seventies sleaze of "The Devil & Mister Jones" and "Lucifer on The Sofa", or the rarefied roadhouse grit of "Held", Spoon have never cranked up their Spooniness so Spoonfully.

There's definitely a post-pandemic urgency here; after a couple of albums that leaned into studio digitalia, 2014's *They Want My Soul* and 2017's *Hot Thoughts,* this one feels like a return to the coiled, trenchant band-in-a-room brio of LPs like their 2002 classic, *Kill the Moonlight*. "*Sing my heart out, beat my chest*," Daniel sings on "My Babe".

Proudly basic titles like "Wild", "Feels Alright", and "My Babe" sum up the thrill of getting back to old-fashioned rock'n'roll kicks. With "Wild", Daniel lets loose a ferocious Neil Diamond homage, like he's heroically sweating out a hot August night of the soul. He says he spent a lot of time during quarantine listening to his Tejas homies ZZ Top, and you can hear that in the way the tense, torrid guitars lash into notoriously locked-in drummer Jim Eno's hypnotic conclusion on pretty much every song. For a little languid beauty, there's the Ray Davies whimsy of "Astral Jacket".

They've even got a song called "On the Radio," which sounds like what it suggests: a Nineties indie-rock guy channeling his memories of David Bowie and ELO into an ode to salvation by the FM dial. It's a pretty absurd sentiment these days—kind of like the Little River Band singing about dancing to Glenn Miller on "Reminiscing" in 1978. But Daniel delivers his dashboard gospel with the spiritual intensity of a Pentecostal holy roller. *Lucifer on The Sofa* is that kind of record, the sound of ancient dreams born again. ®

BROODS

BY MAIRÉAD BILTON-GOUGH

BROODS
Space Island
Island Records AUS/UMA
★★★★☆

BROODS' FOURTH full-length, Space Island, exposes a deeper and more complex side of the New Zealand brother-sister duo, unveiling a moving high-concept album. Ten thought-provoking tracks are unified by the theme of heartbreak, as they traverse the all-encompassing waves of grief and take us along for the emotion-driven ride. While lyrically relatable as one processes a breakup ("Tryna get away from my mind / Tryna get used to my life"), the album is rhythmically diverse (from moody "Goodbye To The World I Know", to delicate "Like a Woman" and "Gaslight", to upbeat indie-pop dance tracks "Piece Of My Mind" and "Keep"). Undeniably, *Space Island* is cosmically influenced, embellished with flickerings of space-like synth sounds throughout. Taking you into a realm of fantasy, as though being in space allows you to express and heal in a way that isn't quite possible on Earth, Space Island is the breakup album of 2022.

Camp Cope
Running with The Hurricane
Poison City Records
★★★★½

CAMP COPE

BY GEORDIE GRAY

CAMP COPE'S THIRD album, *Running with The Hurricane*, sees the trio make friends with peace, and in turn, they've never sounded more powerful or self-assured. Lo-fi sparsity has always served Camp Cope well; this time, they've revved up the sound. Produced by Georgia Maq alongside Anna Laverty at Sing Sing Recording Studios, with contributions from Courtney Barnett, and Shauna Boyle of Cable Ties, the album is fine-tuned and fuller, resulting in a transformative, incredibly textured sound that allows the songwriting to soar. Georgia Maq is a precise analyst of the ways in which people, despite their best intentions, harm one another. There's a lot of pain to unpack, but Camp Cope does it deftly, and with hard-earned forgiveness. Ultimately, it's a record which is the result of Camp Cope going through hell and coming out the other side. As Georgia Maq sings in the album's title track, "*the only way out is up*".

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor

Ocean Grove
Up in The Air Forever
UNFD
★★★★☆

OCEAN GROVE

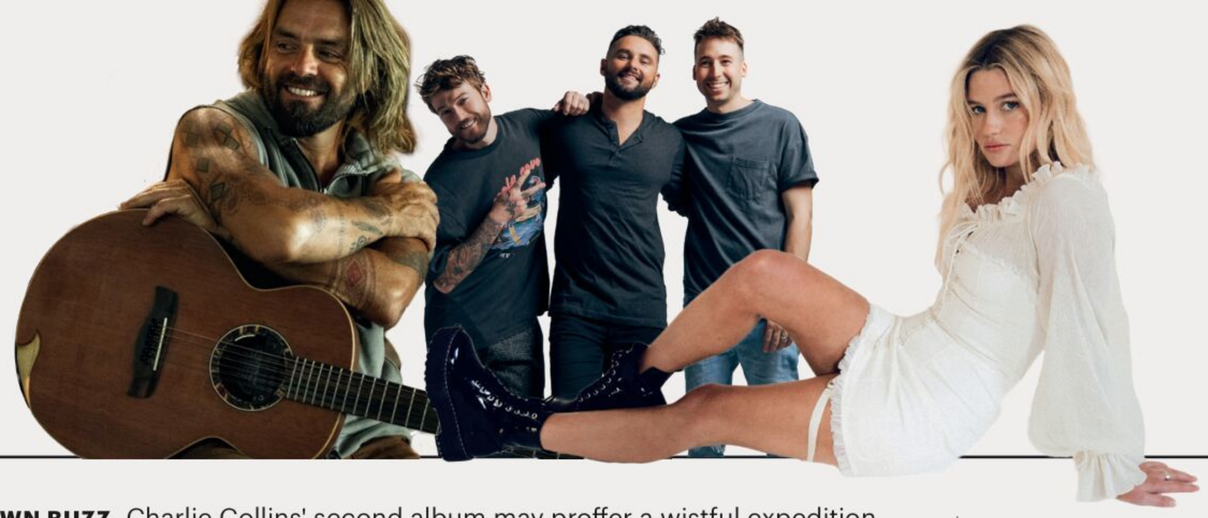
BY TYLER JENKE

More than two years since they changed the game with second album, *Flip Phone Fantasy*, Ocean Grove have continued to break new ground with *Up in The Air Forever*, an album that is equal parts a mission statement for their beliefs, and a musical evolution. Armed with blistering riffs, powerful instrumentation, and truly addictive choruses, the trio look at their third record as a bastion of positivity and opportunity. Built around the notion of PMA (Positive Mental Attitude), and designed to empower the listener to "reach for the stars" *Up in The Air Forever* expresses strong anarchic sentiments as Ocean Grove hit out at the systems that limit and restrict individualism and creativity. As a result, their third record is their most unapologetic, with the group's eclectic musical tastes bolstered by the addition of the Oddworld 3000 (the same shoe seen on the album's artwork which represents a vessel for "personal freedom, unbridled creativity and bucking societal tropes"). This in turn leads to collaborations with the likes of Lil Aaron and Dune Rats, representing the sort of limitless possibility and potential that awaits them. Though their early days were spent finding their feet, *Up in The Air Forever* sees Ocean Grove slipping the Oddworld 3000 onto those feet and running into the horizon, content with taking everything as it comes and blazing their own trail, now and forever.

LEFT TO RIGHT: CAMP COPE: NICK MCKK, BROODS: SUPPLIED, OCEAN GROVE: MICHELLE GRACE HUNDER

Quick Hits

Eight new albums you need to know about now



Charlie Collins

Undone

(Island Records Aus/UMA)

BREAKDOWN BUZZ. Charlie Collins' second album may proffer a wistful expedition down misery's highway, but *Undone* is hardly a lamentation of the drama triangle. Collins ignores the victim, hero, persecutor tropes of a relationship breakdown and owns the parts she played. Her ownership of past mistakes hits hardest on commanding boogie "Fuck It" and the vulnerable duet "No More To Lose". *Undone* offers no easy answers but then again, none of the best albums do. **POPPY REID**

★★★½☆

Mild Orange

Looking For Space

(AWAL)

SUMMER LOVING. Sitting between modern, psychedelia-infused indie rock and the lush, expansive soundscapes of classic dream-pop, New Zealand outfit Mild Orange draw from the best elements of both to create their cruisy third album *Looking For Space*. Thanks to its shimmering, reverb-drenched guitars and catchy songwriting the album feels like a summer holiday, vivid December sunsets and all. **SAM BOWMER**

★★★½☆

Short Stack

Maybe There's No Heaven

(UNFD)

TRANSFORMED CHARM. It feels as though no time has passed since the trio from Budgewoi burst out of teenage bedroom stereos more than a decade ago with their undeniably catchy blend of pop punk. Now, Short Stack's post-pubescent angst is firmly intact, but there has been a sudden and unlikely transformation. On this fifth album, the band's first in seven years, Short Stack traverse differing genres and moods with deliberate (but still bratty) charm. **POPPY REID**

★★★½☆

GRAACE

Self Preservation

(Sony Music Australia)

LOVE AND LOSS. Three years after the release of her debut EP, *Self Sabotage*, GRAACE returns with *Self Preservation*. A meditative exploration of grief, loss, loneliness, and rebirth, GRAACE finds herself returning to her roots, once again behind the keys and guitar. A stylistic heel-turn which gives her superb knack for songwriting room to breathe, it's a powerful ode to owning one's trauma, moving on, and embracing life as it comes. **GEORDIE GRAY**

★★★½☆

Mousey

My Friends

(Winegum Records)

FRESH FIND. The greatest strength of *My Friends* is how well it straddles the line between fresh and familiar. New Zealand singer-songwriter Mousey's lyricism and songwriting are excellent, bolstered by the album's phenomenal production. Together, the three elements reward repeated listens as you focus in on every expertly crafted element that comprise the listening experience. It's effortlessly creative without being contrarian, and immediately accessible without being shallow. **SAM BOWMER**

★★★★☆

Xavier Rudd

Jan Juc Moon

(Salt. X Records/Virgin Music Australia)

WILD NATURE. It's near-impossible to hear anything from Xavier Rudd without being struck by the arresting quality of his passion and musicianship—and the way they intertwine. *Jan Juc Moon*, the latest entry in an already-exhaustive catalogue, continues to showcase why Rudd is one of the country's most successful First Nations exports. Weaving together organic sounds of nature and wildlife, themes of environmentalism and Indigenous history—and powerful compositions that sees him working with the likes of J-MILLA or the Slabb Brothers—*Jan Juc Moon* is one of Xavier Rudd's most resonant albums to date. **TYLER JENKE**

★★★★½

ROMERO

Turn It On!

(Cool Death Records/Feel It Records)

HARD ROCK DESTINY. With members that hail from a number of acclaimed outfits, ROMERO seemed destined for greatness from the beginning. Complemented by the passionate vocals of Alanna Oliver, it was only in 2020 that they released their debut single, but as they continue to refine their eclectic sound, it's clear the future is theirs. Armed with punk sensibilities, Seventies-era rock theatrics, and stellar songwriting, the only thing left to do is turn it up as ROMERO *Turn It On!*. **TYLER JENKE**

★★★☆☆

Barney McAll

Precious Energy

(Extra Celestial Arts/ Mothertongue Records)

WORLD-CLASS. Considering his exhaustive discography and list of accolades, it's almost a foregone conclusion that any new release from Barney McAll is going to be one that is worth your time. And with *Precious Energy*, he's once again proven his worth as a world-class professional. A record that spans genres, continents, and eras, and recorded with members of Hiatus Kaiyote, Laneous, Rita Satch, and Gary Bartz, *Precious Energy* pays homage to some of music's iconic greats, all while McAll cements himself as a legend in his own right. **BRITTANY JENKE**

★★★★☆

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

LEFT TO RIGHT: XAVIER RUDD: BEN WATSON, SHORT STACK: PAT O HARA, GRAACE: JESS GLEESON

Rolling Stone GUIDE

Tyler, the Creator

The avant-garde L.A. troublemaker who became one of hip-hop's essential innovators

By WILL DUKES

Must-Haves

Call Me If You Get Lost
2021

Tyler, the Creator's sixth studio album is the one where he made all the moving parts in his bifurcated brain flow into a seamless stream of sure-shot bangers. With mixtape icon DJ Drama as host, he samples obscure Seventies jazz, evokes classic R&B, and features Pharrell as well as hard-nosed Detroit MC 42 Dugg, arriving at a fully realized work as inviting as it is head-spinning.

Further Listening

Goblin
2013

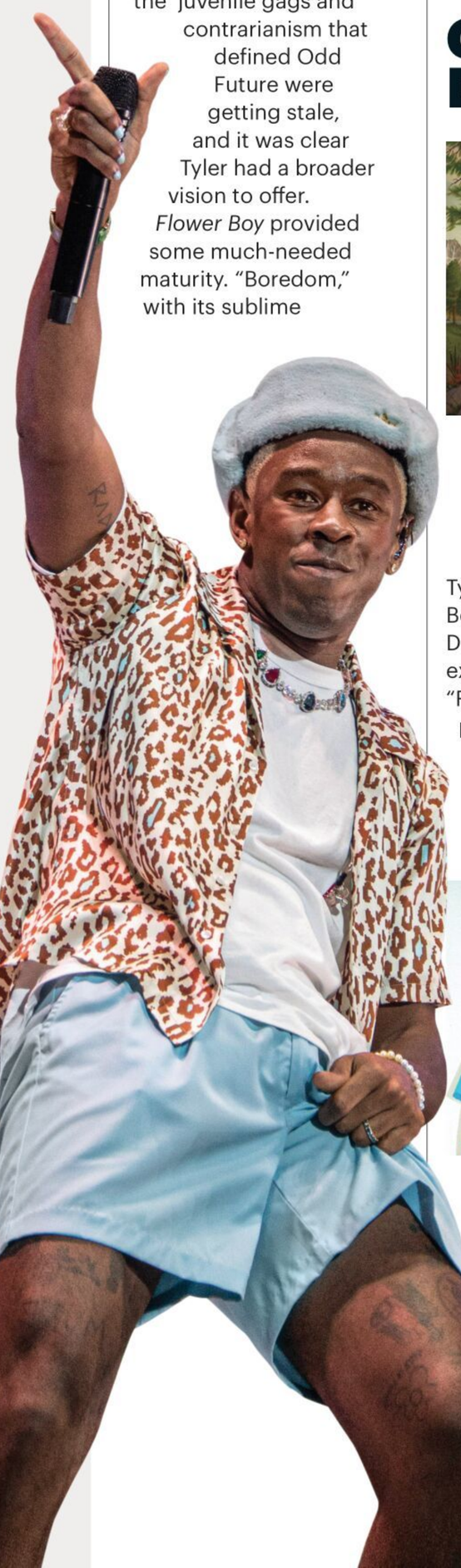
This is where it all started. Only skate rats were up on Odd Future before Tyler, the Creator, and Hodgy Beats blitzkrieged *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon* with their frenetic collab "Sandwitches." *Goblin* is rough around the edges — somewhere between low-fi mixtape and ready-for-prime-time debut. But Tyler gave zero fucks. He had a lot to prove, and mostly lived up to the hype.

Flower Boy
2017

A decade into their run, the juvenile gags and contrarianism that defined Odd Future were getting stale, and it was clear Tyler had a broader vision to offer. *Flower Boy* provided some much-needed maturity. "Boredom," with its sublime orchestral flourishes, makes an enchanted wonderland out of ennui. "November" finds him talking about doing taxes, for Chrissakes. Safe to say the boy had flowered into a man.

Igor
2019

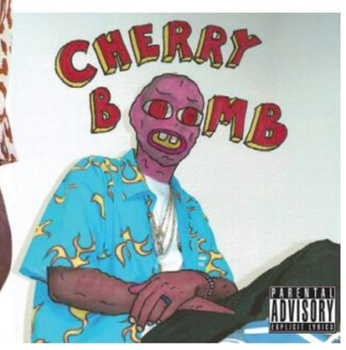
Though its cover has him looking like some pop-art Polaroid of Max Headroom, there's nothing artificial about Tyler's breakup opus. The nostalgic vibe is heavy on cuts like "Earfquake," and "I Think," on which the synths give off big acid-washed energy. And rejection never sounded sweeter than on "Running Out of Time."



Going Deeper

Wolf
2013

Wolf is an uncompromising crowd-pleaser, and easily Tyler's most underrated album. Besties Earl Sweatshirt and Domo Genesis lay waste to the exotic Rhodes-suffused thud of "Rusty." There's enough off-color punchlines ("Colossus") and offhanded angst to make *Wolf* the excellent logical progression from those early Odd Future tapes.



Cherry Bomb
2015

No one was quite sure where Tyler was going with his third album. Odd Future had broken up, and its leader seemed to be taking a throw-shit-at-the-wall approach. That said, there's a lot to love here — from the chakra-healing soul of "Find Your Wings" (which feels like a time capsule from some Black righteous spacemen) to the mosh-ready "Death Camp."

More Creation

Half a dozen loose gems from the Tyler canon

"PIGIONS"

Earl Sweatshirt, 2010
Earl Sweatshirt is the most gifted of Tyler's Odd Future peers — precocious, literary, rebellious. But here, he pales next to Tyler, who takes over the jazzy track like he's some Dickensian villain.

"ORANGE JUICE"

Odd Future, 2010
Tyler's clownish growl aligns spectacularly with Earl Sweatshirt's labyrinthian verbal gymnastics to make this clever mixtape flip of Gucci Mane's "Lemonade" an essential cut.

"OLDIE"

Odd Future, 2012
Tyler turned this full-on posse cut — like the Native Tongues on Adderall — into a platform for his scene-stealing, mischievous one-liners, asserting that he's "flyer than an ostrich moshing in a tar pit."

"TELEPHONE CALLS"

A$AP Mob (feat. A$AP Rocky, Playboi Carti, Tyler, the Creator, and Young Gleesh), 2016
Early friction between Harlem crew A$AP Mob and Odd Future's originator evolves into a bromance on this manic meeting of the minds; Tyler runs laps around the caustic beat, bragging that the "ambulance come when I hit the scene."

"SOMETHING TO RAP ABOUT"

Freddie Gibbs and the Alchemist (feat. Tyler, the Creator), 2020
Tyler practically floats on this track, leavening Freddie Gibbs' formidable dope talk with upbeat couplets that flow by like a TED Talk on gratitude.

"THE FLY WHO COULDN'T FLY STRAIGHT"

Westside Gunn (feat. Tyler, the Creator), 2021
This hazy boom-bap affair proves Tyler has more than enough ammunition to shoot it out with the best of 'em, as he raps, "Think you that big stepper, fuck around, get your ankles tied." ®

SACHA LECCA

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James channels her blondest bombshell as Anderson.

T.V.

THE SEX TAPE THAT STARTED IT ALL

Disney+ humanizing and hilarious 'Pam & Tommy' exposes a pivotal moment in porn and pop culture

ALAN SEPINWALL

Pam & Tommy

NETWORK	Disney+
AIR DATE	Feb. 2
STARRING	Lily James Sebastian Stan Seth Rogen Nick Offerman Taylor Schilling Fred Hechinger

★★★★☆

WHILE WATCHING the stolen sex tape featuring *Baywatch* star Pamela Anderson and Mötley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee, Uncle Miltie (Nick Offerman) says, "This is so private. It's like we're seeing something we're not supposed to be seeing." A beat later, he admits, "Which is kind of what makes it so fucking hot."

That push and pull between embarrassment and lust drives much of *Pam & Tommy,* a whip-smart, funny, and ultimately poignant re-examination of an event that once seemed like an easy punchline for tabloids and Jay Leno monologues. The eight-part miniseries humanises Anderson (played by Lily James) and Lee (Sebastian Stan), acknowledges all the ways the theft of their sex tape transformed celebrity and media culture, and still manages to be absurd and at times hilarious in a way that will leave you gasping for breath. (It's everything Ryan Murphy tried and failed to do with docudramas like *Halston* and *Impeachment*.)

Pam & Tommy starts in the summer of 1995, with carpenter Rand Gauthier working on the newlyweds' new master bedroom. In its opening moments, he's distracted from his work by their constant, extremely loud lovemaking, and begins firing his nail gun in rhythm with their moans. The gag is not subtle, but then, neither were international sex symbol Anderson and metal bad boy Lee. The first hour largely focuses on Gauthier—a dreamer whose would-be inventions ("Imagine a microwave, but for cold!") never materialise—as he's abused and ultimately stiffed by Lee for his work, inspiring him to rob the couple's safe for revenge. (The details of the theft briefly turn this into a heist movie.) It's a clever way into the story, playing into our preconceptions of Anderson and Lee as oversexed cartoons in need of comeuppance, and initially framing Gauthier as the sympathetic injured party (Rogen's terrific, and surprisingly convincing as a blue-collar grunt) who just gave people what they wanted.

This is just setting up the audience for the way *Pam & Tommy* ultimately takes the side of its title characters (her more than him), played fantastically by James and Stan. In real life, James looks nothing like Anderson, yet the hair-and-makeup team somehow transform her into a dead ringer. The show also endows her and Stan with convincing re-creations of Anderson's and Lee's most famous physical attributes. (The latter is the subject of an utterly bonkers scene that we would not dream of spoiling, but that the rest of the year in television will have to work long and hard to equal, let alone rise above.)

But James' and Stan's performances go much deeper than their newfound resemblances to Anderson and Lee. They're not playing the caricatures we thought we knew. James' Anderson is particularly winning. She's keenly aware of what the world expects of her, and of the wild benefits and intense drawbacks of her iconic physique. Often, she comes across as the small-town British Columbia girl she was before she became heroic lifeguard CJ Parker, and she's smart enough to know that Lee will not be healthy for her, even as she can't resist his outsize charisma. And the magic of the thing is that Stan makes Lee seem genuinely charming—a dim, volatile asshole to the rest of the world, but someone whose appeal to Anderson makes immediate, perfect sense. Near the end of a whirlwind courtship in Cancún, he asks her, "Would you do me the insane honour of being my wife?" And how could she possibly say no to such a question? We all know the bad times ahead for them as a couple, including incidents of domestic abuse by Lee, but none of this version of the story works if their initial flush of love doesn't feel real. After Gauthier and porn veteran Miltie (Offerman embraces the sleaze of it all) begin selling copies of the tape, Gauthier's

James and Stan face the paps.

ERIN SIMKIN/HULU. 2

ex-wife, Erica (Taylor Schilling), watches it and says, "I kinda like them. I know he's a fucking idiot and everything, and he is, but he's strangely kind of likable."

The narrative runs on parallel tracks. In one, Gauthier and Miltie figure out how to distribute copies of the stolen tape, until the operation (financed by a loan shark played by Andrew Dice Clay) slips out of their control. In the other, Anderson and Lee discover that the most intimate part of their relationship has become terribly public, and that they have no way to stop it. Together, the two stories point the way toward the next quarter-century of popular culture. The sex tape ruined Anderson's career (well, that and her disastrous movie-star vehicle *Barb Wire*, about which *Pam & Tommy* pulls no punches), but only six years later, the release of a similar one started Kim Kardashian down the path to becoming a billionaire influencer. Coupled with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, the tape transformed how we talk about sex, making taboo topics into normal parts of public discourse. It was one of the first products to sell like hotcakes through the internet, and once a digital copy of it was uploaded to an early webcam site, it helped bring the idea of internet porn into the mainstream.

Before all of this happens, Pamela tells a publicist for *Barb Wire* that she aspires to be like Jane Fonda, a sex symbol who then became an Oscar-winning actor and antiwar activist who never cared what people thought of her. Fonda also became associated with bestselling videotapes, but in the case of her workouts, it was voluntary. *Pam & Tommy* repeatedly acknowledges the unfair toll the sale of the tape took on Anderson's life, even as it's wildly entertaining most of the time. Pamela Anderson never got to have a Jane Fonda-esque second act, and maybe couldn't have even if Rand Gauthier had never entered her husband's life. But here, she at least gets her story retold in a far kinder and more endearing way. ®

PAMELA'S ONSCREEN OEUVRE

Give Anderson credit where it's due: Several of her roles are iconic—for better or worse.

Home Improvement
1991-93

As the "Tool Time Girl" for the sitcom's first two seasons, she wielded drills and punchlines with skill.

Baywatch
1992-97

The most popular star when *Baywatch* was the world's most popular show.

Barb Wire
1996

The comic-book stinker rips off *Casablanca*—and casts Anderson as Bogie?

VIP
1998-2002

Anderson played a bodyguard to the stars in this syndicated action-comedy.

Borat
2006

A smitten Borat tries abducting Anderson—gamely playing herself, naturally—in the climax of his riotous film debut.

Scott plays a desk jockey.

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Severance
NETWORK: Apple TV+
AIR DATE: Feb. 18
STARRING: Adam Scott, Patricia Arquette, John Turturro
★★★★☆

IN THIS Ben Stiller-directed series created by Dan Erickson, Adam Scott plays Mark, a corporate cubicle drone who's undergone a "severance" procedure to separate his memory of his time on the job from his memory of everything else. One version of Mark (called an "innie") never gets to leave the office, while the other (his "outie") has no clue what his body does there for eight hours a day. *Severance*'s literalisation of the struggle for work-life balance feels equal parts Charlie Kaufman-esque sci-fi whimsy, paranoid Seventies thriller, and end-stage capitalism satire.

It's also very, very good—especially the further you go down the rabbit hole with Mark and fellow innies Helly (Britt Lower), Irving (John Turturro), and Dylan (Zach Cherry) to discover how terrible an existence devoted solely to your bosses would be. When Helly's work-self wakes up for the first time in the office, with no idea who she is or how she got there, she asks, "This isn't, like, hell or something?". Mark gently insists that it's not. But within a few episodes, Helly seems to be onto something metaphorically, and not just because older colleagues like Irving, the quirky Burt (Christopher Walken), and domineering boss Harmony (Patricia Arquette) treat the company itself as their religion.

Stiller has become an even more assured and visually inventive filmmaker than he was on 2018's *Escape From Dannemora*. Here, he captures both the strangeness of the concept and its emotional implications. His camera makes the impressively weird production design seem even more unnerving, and he gets fascinating, nuanced performances from familiar actors like Scott and Turturro, and less-heralded ones like Lower and Tramell Tillman (as the perma-smiling goon enforcing severance rules).

The story moves slowly at first, but builds across the first season's nine episodes. The finale is almost unbearably tense in a way that's far more pleasurable than anything the innies get to experience as they complete tasks they don't fully understand, in service of a world they're not allowed to visit. A.S.

UN-INCREDIBLE HULK

Reacher
NETWORK: Amazon
AIR DATE: Feb. 4
STARRING: Alan Ritchson, Malcolm Goodwin, Willa Fitzgerald
★★☆☆☆

WITH JACK Reacher, size matters—but it also isn't everything. Starting in 1997, Lee Child authored two dozen thrillers starring Reacher, a retired Army investigator who now lives as a hobo, wandering from town to town and finding trouble along the way. He's a brilliant detective, but also a six-foot-five-inch wall of muscle who draws eyes in every room he enters, and is the favourite in the many fights he gets into.

Hilariously, pocket-size movie star Tom Cruise insisted on playing Reacher in two films that more or less captured the character's intensity and self-sufficiency. Cruise just lacked the mythical stature that most clearly distinguished Reacher from his action-movie peers and sleuthing counterparts.

Amazon's new *Reacher* series basically gets the build right. Star Alan Ritchson is tall and swole enough to look plausible casually bursting out of a pair of flex cuffs. But whenever his shirt comes off (which is often), he has the definition of a man who spends four hours a day in a gym with a personal trainer, versus a slightly evolved caveman who came by his strength through scraps and brawls.

Ritchson dusts off his guns.

Ritchson's six-pack is a physical manifestation of a tonal problem: his Reacher is smarmy and pleased with himself, rather than casually secure in his abilities. He's a generic vigilante who just happens to look like a mountain next to the small-town Georgia cops (played by Malcolm Goodwin and Willa Fitzgerald) who assist him in this maiden adventure.

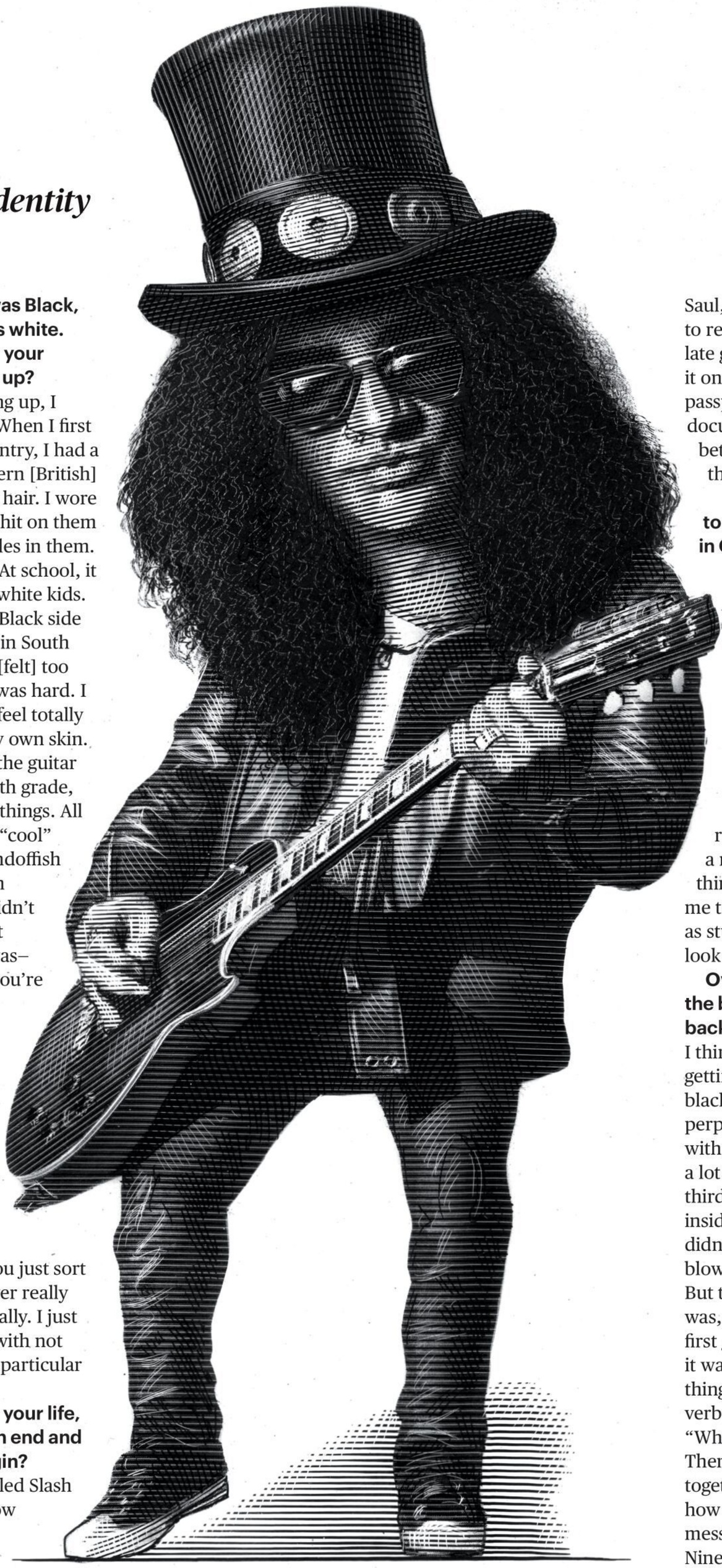
The show also lacks the internal monologue in which Reacher is constantly doing the math to figure out where suspects may have gone and how best to injure the five men attacking him at the moment. This Reacher occasionally explains himself to others, but never in a way that makes him live up to the "Sherlock Homeless" nickname he has in the novels. And whenever Ritchson tries to show Reacher as stoic, he instead comes off as stiff and robotic.

The season is otherwise a relatively faithful adaptation of the first Reacher novel, *The Killing Floor*. But the books live or die on Reacher himself, rather than on the sometimes gimmicky plotting or Child's fascination with torture and gore. If *he's* not interesting, none of it is. That's a big problem, no matter the leading man's size. A.S.

FROM TOP: ATSUSHI NISHIJIMA/APPLE TV+; ROBOTOK; KERI ANDERSON/AMAZON STUDIOS

Slash

The guitar god on finding his identity and keeping the peace in GN'R



You reunited with Guns N' Roses five years ago, but you've released your second solo album since then. What do you get out of leading your own band at this point?
None of the other bullshit that goes with being in a rock'n'roll band, and having recognition and having this and that and the other, and all the stuff that people get so preoccupied with—none of that exists in this band. All anybody wants to do is get together, play, record, and go out and tour. I just keep it going because we have a good time doing it, and it's really stress-free.

Slash's '4', featuring Myles Kennedy and the Conspirators, was released in Feb.

Rock'n'roll isn't as popular as it once was. Have you ever been tempted to change things up?
I'm a rock'n'roll guy through and through. It's in my blood. I don't give a shit what the fuck's going on elsewhere; that's what I do. Now that rock'n'roll is not doing the numbers that it once did, I've seen the whole integrity of the genre fucking go down the tubes. After the Nineties, when file sharing started happening, everybody started wanting to be seen and not necessarily caring about what people were hearing. Now that there's no money in it, kids are fucking just doing it for the pure passion of doing it. And it's fucking great. So that's exciting to me.

Your mother was Black, and your father is white. How did you find your identity growing up?
When I was coming up, I was a real misfit. When I first moved to this country, I had a really thick Northern [British] accent. I had long hair. I wore T-shirts that said shit on them and jeans with holes in them. I just didn't fit in. At school, it was very straight white kids. But the primarily Black side of my family lives in South Central LA, and I [felt] too white [*laughs*]. It was hard. I didn't really ever feel totally comfortable in my own skin. Then I picked up the guitar in seventh or eighth grade, and that changed things. All of a sudden I was "cool" because I was standoffish or aloof. And from that point on, it didn't really matter what colour anybody was—except for when you're looking for other people to work with in a band and your skin's darker than them. There's definitely vibes that you could pick up along the way. But it's just all part of life, and you just sort of go with it. I never really took it too personally. I just sort of identified with not being anything in particular [*laughs*].

At this point in your life, where does Slash end and Saul Hudson begin?
I started being called Slash in ninth grade. Now it feels weird if anybody calls me Saul, because the last person to really call me Saul was my late grandmother. But I keep it on my driver's license, my passport, and all my legal documents. Because it's better not to be "Slash" in that context.

What's the secret to keeping the peace in Guns N' Roses these days?
Just keeping it to ourselves. The biggest issue was that as the band got huge, as street-smart as I'd love to say the band was at the time, [music business people] really inserted themselves in between our regular relationships and had a real negative effect on things. It ended up causing me to leave, and then being as stubborn as I am, I didn't look back.

Overall, what's been the best part about getting back with GN'R?
I think the biggest thing was getting past this horrible black cloud that was perpetuating, having to do with me and Axl. We had a lot of issues born out of third-party stuff. It was very insidious, and the longer we didn't talk, the more it got blown out of proportion. But the more significant part was, when Axl and Duff and I first got into a room playing, it was just like this fucking thing that I can't even really verbally describe. It was like, "Whoa, that's what that is." Then, just to go out and play together, it's like, I wonder how the fuck we got into that mess that we were in in the Nineties. KORY GROW

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